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PC GAMER

FEBRUARY 2009

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Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.

IT'LL BE JUST LIKE STARTING OVER...

I tend to cultivate my reputation as a snarly New Yorker, but the truth is that I'm actually something of a Pollyanna, so this time of year always gets to me a bit. (Despite the February issue date, we're actually going to press in early December.) Not so much the holiday stuff—I'm a year-round consumer, anyway—but the fact that one year is about to give way to another always makes me feel a little contemplative. Add to that the fact that this is my last official issue as *PC Gamer*'s EIC and you've got a recipe for some serious navel-gazing. All we need now is a musical montage.

Except, of course, that things are not as serious as all that. New years come every 365 days, so before I know it, 2009's "new beginning" will have given way to preparatory grumbling about E3 and goggle-eyed wonder at *Diablo III, Dragon Age*, and all the other games in our cover story. And even though I won't be writing this column or terrorizing the editors from the EIC chair anymore, I'm not at all leaving *PC Gamer*, just moving to a different spot on the masthead. In fact, now I'll just be terrorizing them from an office—which, I can tell you, makes terrorizing a *lot* easier, since if you close the door, the weeping doesn't disturb others.

I'm also leaving the magazine in the hands of the most capable bunch around, now to be led by one Gary Steinman, who's been kicking around the game-journalism industry for even longer than I have, and that's saying something: namely, that Gary is old. But with age comes wisdom, I'm told, so I know the G-man will have things very well in hand. In fact, I'm very excited to see what kind of a stamp he and the gang put on *PC Gamer*—they have my proxy to shake things up, and I hope they do.

There's not much point in saying good-bye, since I'm not really going anywhere, but I will say thank you: Thank you, dear readers, for being such rabid fans of *PC Gamer* and PC gaming. And thank you, Logan, Dan S., Evan, Debra, and Dan F., for your dedication and hard work—seriously, you guys are unparalleled.

Happy New Year! Happy New EIC! Happy New Games!

/// KRISTEN SALVATORE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF ///

THE PLAYLIST 0209

KRISTEN SALVATORE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Despite contradictory reports on its fun factor, I'm going to sink some time into the new *Prince of Persia* game. I loved the last three, and something about the art style of the new one makes me feel like I'm appreciating something grown-up, like a 401K or colo-rectal exam, except with double-jumping.

LOGAN DECKER EXECUTIVE EDITOR

It was more fun than, say, playing with a sock full of wet sand, but the new *Prince of Persia* was still a harsh comedown from the heights of *Tomb Raider: Underworld*. So I dumped the caped dandy and his magical princess in favor of finally going in pursuit of the Jackal in *Far Cry 2*.

DAN STAPLETON REVIEWS EDITOR

I've been deliberately avoiding *GTA4* on the console so that I could get the full experience on the PC, and now my time has come. I intend to play the hell out of this thing, even though it means putting aside *Left 4 Dead* and the newly patched and addictive-as-ever *Sins of a Solar Empire* 1.1.

EVAN LAHTI ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Why won't I spend 10 minutes doing the dishes, but I'll invest an entire evening cleaning out every giant spider, cat archer, centaur, and cyclops from the caves of Greece with my frost mace? *Titan Quest* is relapsin' my OCD, but spending hours in *L4D* each evening Uzi-cleansing the Earth of infected ain't helping.

DAN FITZPATRICK LEAD DESIGNER

I finally ditched my bulky, ancient 10GB iPod for a younger, slimmer 120GB model. Now I can catch up on *Dexter* and *Mad Men* while I'm camped out in the master bath, hiding from the wife and kids. Once I get a mini-fridge and microwave in there, there will be no reason for me ever to come out!

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LETTERS

THE TOP LETTERS OF 2009
There is no way we could get better letters than these for the rest of the year...unless you e-mail us at letters@pcgamer.com or write to us at PC Gamer Letters, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080.

DISSENTING OPINION UNLOCKED

I have to disagree with Evan Lahti's Backspace column about achievements in the Holiday issue. I enjoy playing through a game at my own pace, and once in a while doing something cool that sets off a reward. I don't feel that I have to get them all, or that I'm confined by them. In games like *Team Fortress 2*, I've completed enough for a couple of the unlocks, but not because I felt like I *had* to do something special. I just enjoyed the game and got achievements as I played. I'm not disappointed that I didn't get all of them, but I enjoyed the popup and graphics when I did something cool. MIKE SOLOWISCH

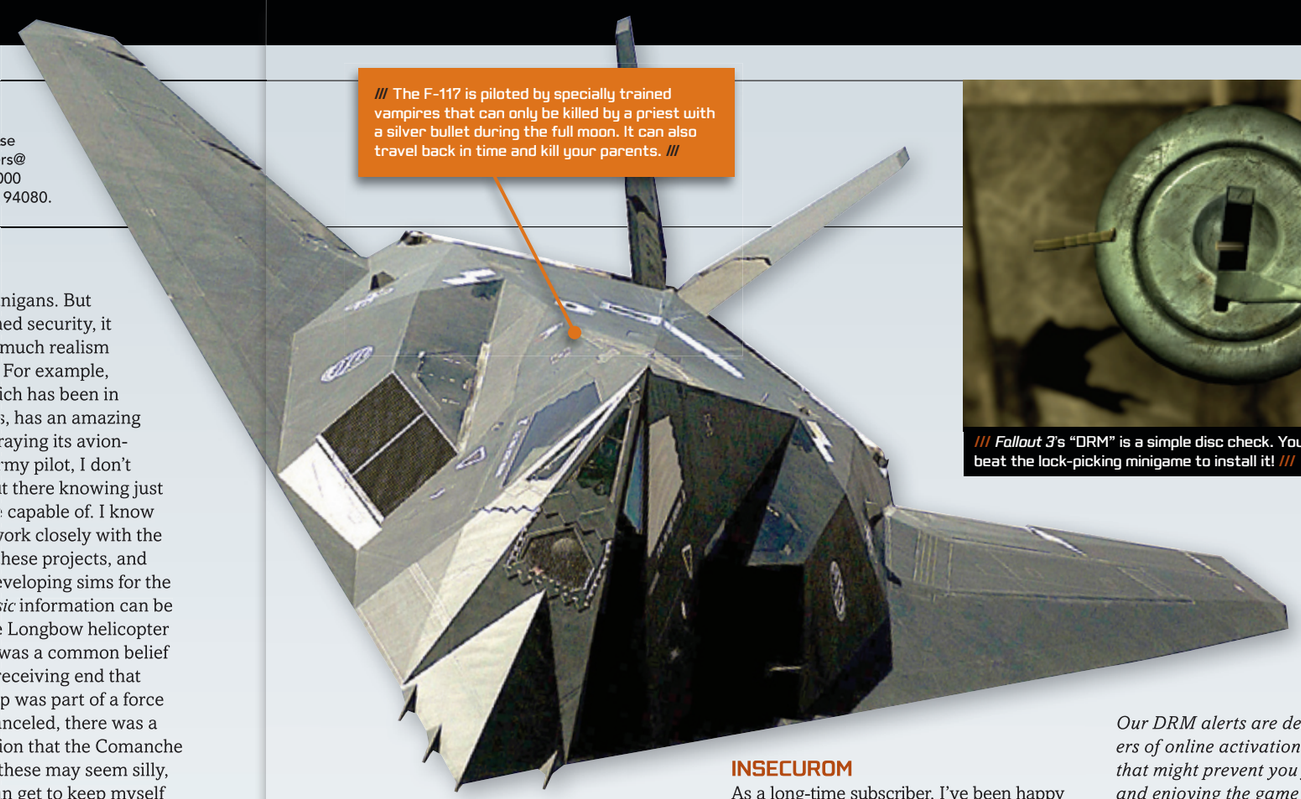
Evan responds: More power to you, Mike! I'd only aim to remind folks that rewards should be an inherent form of feedback in games—not one that's dispensed artificially. What's more memorable: the time you made a game-saving sniper shot in TF2, *or when you finally unlocked the "Grey Matter" achievement with your 25th headshot? We love in-game bonuses and rewards, we'd just encourage players (and developers) to value those that encourage you to play at your own pace, rather than forcing you to jump through often-arbitrary hoops. And for gamers who value the immersiveness of an experience, having an external system of accomplishment attached to a game (like* Fallout 3, BioShock, *or* FarCry 2*) can detract from their enjoyment. There's no right or wrong response to achievements, but it's always good to generate some dialogue about something we're seeing developers adopt more extensively, eh?*

/// Thanks for the achievement, but punching Hunters in the nuts is its own reward. ///

LOOSE LIPS SINK SIMS?

Like many flight sim gamers out there, I crave realism. If a switch doesn't flip or dial turn, I call shenanigans. But with today's heightened security, it would seem that too much realism could be a bad thing. For example, *DCS: Black Shark*, which has been in development for eons, has an amazing level of detail in portraying its avionics package. As an Army pilot, I don't want some people out there knowing just what our systems are capable of. I know that the developers work closely with the military on many of these projects, and are often times co-developing sims for the military, but even *basic* information can be hazardous. When the Longbow helicopter first came out, there was a common belief among those on the receiving end that the radar dome on top was part of a force field. Before it was canceled, there was a common misconception that the Comanche could "cloak." While these may seem silly, I'll take whatever I can get to keep myself and my friends alive. Are developers aware of this? JON HOLZMAN

Thanks to the transparency of our government (which we like to think is a good thing), all the information you'll find in a flight sim is already out there, and much easier to get to via Firefox than by digging through the latest flight sim. But it's all old info—none of the classified details of new high-tech hardware are available to game makers, so the psychological warfare of putting our enemies up against the unknown remains in full effect. Games, in fact, are more likely to exaggerate the capabilities of U.S. military hardware so it's more fun to use, making it seem all the more intimidating.



/// The F-117 is piloted by specially trained vampires that can only be killed by a priest with a silver bullet during the full moon. It can also travel back in time and kill your parents. ///

STERILE ENVIRONMENT

I was wondering what you all use as test platforms. Do you use the same system and keep adding and removing games as you need to? Do you use a typical system that might have IE, Office, and AV programs installed on it? Or do you wipe the machine clean and re-image it with a clean bare-bones install for each review? MIKE KARNES

We generally use real-world computers for our reviews—the same ones we use to check email in Outlook, write reviews in Word, waste valuable time browsing YouTube, and play dozens of other games. We figure you aren't reinstalling Windows every time you fire up a new game, so why should we? If we run into problems we'll try a game on multiple PCs to make sure it's not a fluke, but you should be able to play a game on any general-use machine.

/// *Fallout 3*'s "DRM" is a simple disc check. You don't even have to beat the lock-picking minigame to install it! ///

INSECUROM

As a long-time subscriber, I've been happy to see the inclusion of DRM alerts in reviews in recent issues. However, I feel these alerts are incomplete. There is no alert for *Fallout 3*, which is additionally touted by Dan Stapleton as being DRM-free, yet it does contain version 7.36.0006 of SecuROM. While there may not be installation limits, etc., this kind of information is important to gamers such as myself who are trying to keep our computers completely SecuROM-free.

I recently bought *Civ IV: Colonization* because of the review in your magazine, but before I installed it I did an additional online search for DRM information and found out that it, too, has SecuROM. I admit I should have done this research before I bought it, but perhaps you could list exactly what kind of DRM a game has in your reviews and let consumers make the call about whether or not they want to deal with it. STEVE STADLER

Our DRM alerts are designed to alert gamers of online activation and install limits that might prevent you from installing and enjoying the game you purchased in the event a publisher burns to the ground. We think that's a legitimate concern, even though at that point you might be too busy fighting off the zombie hordes to play games. But, while we disapprove of SecuROM's surreptitious installation and fussiness about disc burning software, we don't consider a simple disc check to be an unreasonable form of DRM. Even in the event of nuclear war, you'll still be able to play Fallout 3 *within your bomb shelter without a problem.*

That said, we'd happily report what type of disc protection each game uses, except for one thing: publishers won't reveal that information any sooner than they absolutely have to, because they don't want to give the pirates any head start on what to look for. Unfortunately, this means that exact information is unavailable at press time.

BRAIN BOMB

Red Alert 3's story has left me scratching my head. In _RA1_, Einstein goes back in time and eliminates Hitler so he never rose to power in Germany. However, in _RA3_, the Soviets go back to 1927 and eliminate Einstein, taking him out of the picture altogether. So what happened to Hitler? If Einstein didn't take him out, he should still be around, right? PATRICK DAVIS

*Red Alert 3's deadliest superweapon is its ability to make your head explode when you try to figure out the time travel story. Let's try: Einstein travelled back to 1924 to kill Hitler, so by the time the Soviets traveled back to 1927, future Einstein had already come and gone. But that makes no sense, because if Einstein didn't exist in 1946, he couldn't have traveled back to 1924 to kill Hitler. But if Einstein didn't eliminate Hitler, then Dr. Zelinsky, the Soviet scientist who built their time machine, would never have existed either, so the Soviets couldn't have gone back in time. *BLAM**

WIN A COPY OF TOMB RAIDER: UNDERWORLD

Are you starved for adventure? Or do you just miss Lara Croft? Enter our random drawing to win one of 10 copies of *Tomb Raider: Underworld* from Eidos. E-mail Contests@pcgamer.com with "Tomb Raider Nation" in the subject line, and include your full name and mailing address in the message body. Contest ends February 20, 2009. See full contest rules on page 95.

EYEWITNESS

THE DEMAKE COMPETITION

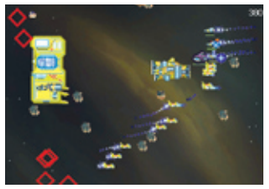
SERVING TODAY'S GAMES YESTERDAY

Using today's sophisticated graphics engines to "re-imagine" classic games like *Sid Meier's Civilization IV: Colonization*, *Alone in the Dark*, and *Tomb Raider* is old hat: How about taking a contemporary game and mashing it down to the style of an old-school favorite? That was the goal of the Bootleg Demakes competition, hosted by The Independent Gaming Source, and the results include FPS games turned into side-scrolling platformers and post-modern fairytales imagined as Soviet propaganda, all of them abstracted just enough to duck an intellectual property lawsuit.

We've skimmed the cream of the crop for you below, but for the complete list of 68 entries go to snipurl.com/5ylh7, or go to forums.tigsource.com, and do a search on Bootleg Demakes for all the faux nostalgia you can handle.

GANG GARRISON 2
DEVELOPER: Faucet Software
This game launches within an application called Smoke and its one and only map is called 2DFort. Yes, it's a side-scrolling recreation of *Team Fortress 2*, and the game's brilliant attention to detail extends from the 8-bit chiptune covers of the themes to a Spy who can actually disguise and go invisible. Best of all, you can play online just as you would with the original game. Awesome work. snipurl.com/4ahg2

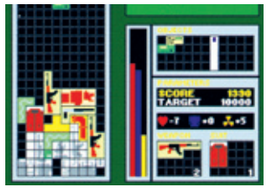
LITTLE GIRL IN UNDERLAND
DEVELOPER: Erin Robinson
It's the result of Soviet scientists discovering a copy of *American McGee's Alice* and turning it into a very funny adventure game with deliberately broken English. After falling into the Underworld, you meet Magic Smiling Cat and encounter foes such as the Capitalpillar, the money-grabbing Lack of Hearts, and the Maydaybug. "Is this thinly veiled criticism of consumer culture?" asks Little Girl. snipurl.com/4ahgg



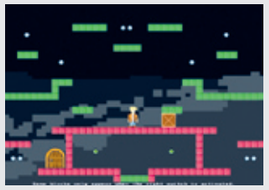
HOUSE GLOBE
DEVELOPER: Oxeye Game Studio
Homeworld re-made with *Dune 2*–era graphics. You still have your mothership—or, in this case, maternal vessel—from which all other ships are built, Harvesters still make runs back and forth to nearby asteroids to gather resources, and there's still a research tree where you open up new technologies and types of ships. And once you've practiced against the computer, you can fight online against a friend. snipurl.com/4ahgu

FILLAUTH
DEVELOPER: Oxeye Game Studio
Turned into cyborgs to survive a great plague, humanity lost the ability to communicate and procreate. One of the last fully human men heads out into the wasteland to find others like him. With knowledge of procreation gleaned from *Dirty Dancing* DVDs, you must restart humanity. Cue gruesome isometric RPG action. Years later, a second sequel will be made and fans of the original will moan a lot. snipurl.com/4ahh8

AQUARIUM
DEVELOPER: Oracle
Based on *Aquaria*, an underwater exploration and combat game co-created by Derek Yu—who also happens to run TIGSource. *Aquarium* re-imagines the original as a game for the NES, faithfully converting the graphics to pixilated sprites. The demake sticks with keyboard controls as opposed to the original's ambitious mouse gestures, but there's still all the singing and enemy jellyfish your heart could desire. snipurl.com/4ahfp



S.T.A.C.K.E.R.
DEVELOPER: Pishtach
It's essentially *Tetris* with roleplaying elements. But instead of generic blocks, you get falling objects that affect your character, such as dogs taking away your health or a guitar helping your morale. As you progress through levels, you're really making your way across the Zone. It's one of the few games made for the competition that's more than just a send-up: it's an interesting game on its own. snipurl.com/4ahhn

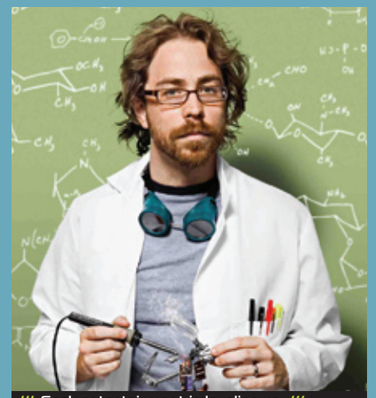


SQUISH
DEVELOPERS: Terry Cavanagh and Josiah Tobin
The PSP platform game *Crush* asked you to complete courses by shifting your perspective from 3D to 2D. So what if it's not on PC? *Squish* does something similar, but with added retro. It lets you switch between 2D and 1D, shifting a level of platforms onto the same plane and letting you get higher than you could otherwise jump. snipurl.com/4ahhv

LARGE-SCALE VEHICULAR STEALING
DEVELOPER: Seregrail7
It's possible some people forget that *Grand Theft Auto* once was a 2D top-down game, but that doesn't make this any less fun. *LSVS* imagines *GTA* as a 16-bit console game, with top-down driving, missions received by cell phone, and *Streets of Rage*–style minigames where you have to beat up old ladies to steal their cars or proposition a prostitute before the police catch you. snipurl.com/4ahey

RE: HIS BRAINS

JONATHAN COULTON—RISING STAR OF THE GEEK RENAISSANCE



/// Geek entertainment is leveling up. ///

Ever since the *Portal* theme song, "Still Alive", put him on the nerd A-list, songwriter and performer Jonathan Coulton has been touring the country with songs about programmers, robots, zombies, and other matters of crucial importance to geekfolk. Coulton—who is, naturally, also a PC gamer—took a few moments to talk with *PC Gamer* about his music, Creative Commons, and the positive aspects of the living dead.

PC GAMER: So how did you come to record *Still Alive*, the theme song from *Portal*?

JONATHAN COULTON: I was doing a show in Seattle and some fans came up to me afterwards and said that they were from Valve. We had a mutual admiration moment because I've been a fan of Valve's games ever since *Half-Life*. [*Portal* project lead] Kim Swift said "Would you ever be interested in writing music for games?" And I said, well, sure!

It was very exciting to get to play it in the offices with the people who made it. The character of GLaDOS was so familiar to me because I've been writing characters like that into my songs for a long time. I'm not really sure she's motivated by evil. She's certainly doing bad things, but I don't think *she* believes she's doing bad things.

You're touring pretty regularly now. When you look out into the crowd, what kind of people do you see in the audience?

Well, not to put too fine a point on it, but there are a lot of geeks out there. I love when I see parents there with their teenage kids and they're both fans—that's the thing that really makes me happy.

Because you distribute your work under the non-commercial Creative-Commons license, your fans do a ton of creative stuff based on your work. Do you have any favorites?

There's a guy named Spiff (www.spiff-world.com) whose specialty is making machinima music videos using *World of Warcraft*. So he gets his friends to log on together, he choreographs [them], then edits it to make a music video that tells a story. It's amazing. At least one of his videos [based on my work] has been watched more than a million times on YouTube and it just boggles my mind. [Before the Internet], how much would you have to pay to get a million people to hear your music? And it cost me nothing!

More and more we aren't just sitting around having stuff fed to us. We're taking it in, chewing it up, and spitting it out in a different form.

One of your crowd-pleasers is the song about an office zombie called "Re: Your Brains". Why do you think nerds love zombies so much?

I don't want to get too deep here, but I think it has something to do with the very no holds-barred approach that zombies take to life. They're really just letting it all hang out, they're not complicated, they're all about brains, but *eating* brains. They're not about using their brains. And I think for geeks who live in their head so much, there's something about that that draws them.

Three free Jonathan Coulton tracks on the disc! "Re: Your Brains", "Chiron Beta Prime", and "Creepy Doll" in MP3 format!

Do you have any plans to be the troubadour in any upcoming games, like, say *Portal 2*?

I know they are working on that, but they haven't gotten to me on that yet. I would of course be very interested in doing that.

Jonathan Coulton's first live concert DVD, *BEST. CONCERT. EVER.*, *is now available at www.jonathancoulton.com. For the full Jonathan Coulton interview, where the songwriter talks about the Code Monkey dance and Mars colonization, go to www.gamesradar.com/coulton.*

RELEASE METER 0209

WHAT YOU'LL BE PLAYING

Ah, February, the time of year when love bursts forth in young boys' hearts like flowers in a field of fresh manure. There's plenty to fall in love with these first few months of 09, so bring candies for Chun-Li when *Street Fighter IV* is released, roses for *Batman: Arkham Asylum*'s Harley Quinn, and maybe a teddy bear for Alma in *F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin* (she looks like she could use a hug).

Q1 2009

Bionic Commando	Capcom
Street Fighter IV	Capcom
Puzzle Quest: Galactrix	D3 Publisher
Battlefield Heroes	EA
Burnout Paradise	EA
Dragon Age: Origins	EA
The Godfather II	EA
The Sims 3	EA
Battlestations: Pacific	Eidos
Raven Squad: Operation Hidden Dagger	Evolved Games
Blood Bowl	Focus Home Interactive
Dungeon Hero	Gamecock
Pro Evolution Soccer 2009	Konami
Empire: Total War	Sega
The Agency	SOE
Demigod	Stardock
Company of Heroes: Tales of Valor	THQ
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II	THQ
Anno 1404	Ubisoft
Tom Clancy's Endwar	Ubisoft
Tom Clancy's HAWX	Ubisoft
F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin	Warner Bros. Interactive
Wanted	Warner Bros. Interactive

Q2 2009

Champions Online	2K Games
Dark Void	Capcom
FUEL	Codemasters
Ride to Hell	Deep Silver
Spore: Space Expansion Pack	EA
Divinity 2	Ego Draconis
Batman: Arkham Asylum	Eidos
Cities XL	Monte Cristo
Two Worlds: The Temptation	SouthPeak Interactive
Company of Heroes: Tales of Valor	THQ
Avatar	Ubisoft
Prototype	Sierra

Q3 2009

Edge of Twilight	SouthPeak Interactive
Section 8	SouthPeak Interactive

Q4 2009

BioShock 2: Sea of Dreams	2K

EVAN LAHTI
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

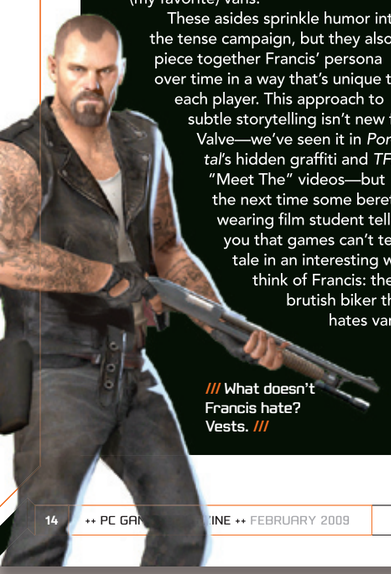
PREVIEWS

ODE TO FRANCIS

Warning posters, graffiti scrawls, broken walls, and empty sedans with their high beams left on. It's these bits of broken scenery that tell *Left 4 Dead*'s story, not a traditional script. Other than the opening cinematic and gameplay-driving actions like summoning rescue vehicles over radio, every line in *L4D* is delivered through a contextual speech system (an iteration on the one Valve used in *Team Fortress 2*) that randomizes what characters say based on different criteria—who's healing who, what infected are attacking, and the group's stress level. The result? Players get an emergent narrative that develops over multiple sessions and doesn't weigh gameplay down with a static story that gets looped again and again.

Francis' character is my favorite example of how this is executed. At first glance, Francis is a tough, masculine archetype: he's the tallest, tattooed (oddly enough, the one on his right arm bears the month and day of my birthday, 6-29-73), wears black, and sports a buzzcut. But by replaying *L4D*, you're able to composite a clearer idea of Francis' personality and his role among the four survivors—comic relief. As you're entering new scenes, the whiny biker sometimes offers a complaint. "The subway can take us straight to Mercy Hospital," Louis might suggest at the beginning of the first campaign. "I hate subways," Francis replies. It might take an hour, a day, or a week, but you'll begin to hear Francis list more of his turn-offs. Planes. The woods. Barns. Helicopters, train yards, the water, sewers, stairs (*and* elevators), doctors, and (my favorite) vans.

These asides sprinkle humor into the tense campaign, but they also piece together Francis' persona over time in a way that's unique to each player. This approach to subtle storytelling isn't new for Valve—we've seen it in *Portal*'s hidden graffiti and *TF2*'s "Meet The" videos—but the next time some beret-wearing film student tells you that games can't tell a tale in an interesting way, think of Francis: the brutish biker that hates vans.



/// What doesn't Francis hate? Vests. ///

HANDS ON

THE SIMS 3

RELEASE DATE: **FEBRUARY 20, 2009**

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

How do you go about improving a game that's become, at well over 100,000,000 copies sold, the best-selling PC game franchise of all time? EA Black Box, I'm guessing, began with another question: Why didn't the *other* six and a half billion people in the world buy it?

If only 10 percent of the world's population owns a computer, and 60 million of those people just aren't very much fun, that still leaves half a billion people who objected to some part of the idea of creating, managing, and lording over a little virtual society of simulated people.

At a recent visit to EA's Bay Area studios for my first grubby hands-on with *The Sims 3*, the first thing I noticed was that EA seemed to have done a clean sweep of all the annoying elements of the two previous games, beginning with the torturous loading screens. I took my Sim on a brisk stroll around the continuous, seamless hamlet of Pleasant Valley, alongside other Sims who were driving to work, tending to their families, going to picnics in the park, and visiting their neighbor's house for a quickie in the afternoon. EA just bagged 170,000,000 new fans.

Even better, the most aggravating micro-management aspects of the game are now *kaput*. Players are no longer required to hover obsessively around their characters in order to send them to the restroom before they soil the carpet, for instance, and don't have to worry about finding gravestones

/// The corner of Swell St. and Dandy Ave. in Pleasant Valley is one of the town's shadier areas. ///

:: VITALS :: **GENRE:** SIMULATION **DEVELOPER:** EA BLACK BOX **PUBLISHER:** EA **URL:** THESIMS.EA.COM

/// Sims are fully-customizable. Apply ill-advised facial hair and questionable schoolgirl outfits to your heart's content. ///

/// Your Sim's traits influence their life aspirations. This young woman is not headed for the convent. ///

/// Exercise is necessary to keep your Sim slim, a somewhat depressing reflection of real life. ///

instead of Sims if they're left on their own for a few minutes during lunch. Instead, Sims are now capable of managing most basic essentials of life on their own, and that's another 280,000,000 new fans there.

PLAYERS THAT DON'T WANT to dedicate an entire week to upgrading their bachelor pad into a spacious family estate can hit the ground running and move into fully-furnished houses, but apprenticing architects will face fewer obstacles, too: when I moved a wall to open up a living room into love nest proportions, the objects on the wall moved with it and the roof adjusted itself, sparing me the embarrassment of a house that comes off looking like a toddler's paper-craft project. You'll also be able to launch the game and take control of any of the Sims you find next door, down the street, protesting outside City Hall, or grabbing a bite to eat at a sidewalk café. Chalk up another 32,000,000 fans.

Micro-managing compulsives, on the other hand, will go nuts over the new customization options, like applying custom textures to most of the objects in your Sim's house, an option that, in my case, led to the creation of an interior design atrocity involving matching plaid sofas, wallpapers, and refrigerator. Add a modest 4,000,000 fans with that one.

Executive Producer Ben Bell sums up for me the difference between *The Sims 2* and *The Sims 3* with a very compact description: "It's not about spinning plates." *The Sims 2* and its expansion packs put players in a series of environments and left it up to them to make sure that everything didn't collapse into death, decay, or catfights. Not anymore. Now you're given the cheerful, thriving mini-verse of Pleasant Valley to raise a Sim family in, and you're tasked with guiding the semi-autonomous Sim of your choice on the path of his or her greatest fulfillment. That path is determined by a set of five personality traits, ranging from Charismatic and Computer Whiz to Neurotic and even downright Evil, that inform each Sim's aspirations.

Instead of intervening when your Sim is on the verge of killing himself, your job might be to push a charismatic and egotistical young man toward a political career, or an evil computer whiz up a career ladder as a criminal until she's kissing her husband on the forehead before taking a taxi to an abandoned warehouse and putting the finishing touches on her plan to subjugate the entire world to her cruel and capricious nature. These accomplishments add to your Sim's overall happiness, paying off in bonuses that make them even easier to manage, like a Steel Bladder that makes going to the potty unnecessary, or a Super Green Thumb that lets your Sim grow his own food.

That's worth at least another 14,000,000 million fans, and I'm beginning to see where EA got the idea to add world domination as an ultimate goal in *The Sims 3*.

/// LOGAN DECKER ///

/// Firing deck turrets is intuitive—colored globes illustrate which guns can rotate to your current target, and a clock animation shows how many of your artillery are reloading. ///

HANDS ON

BATTLESTATIONS: PACIFIC

RELEASE DATE: SPRING 2009

:: BOAT-ON-BOAT ACTION

A dozen Japanese jets, B-17s, and dive bombers are spilling shells and rockets into the ocean like jackpotting slot machines, and I'm calmly thumbing my gamepad, fending off waves of Kamikaze with a single anti-air turret. A tap of the d-pad and I'm in the cockpit of a Corsair fighter, barrel-rolling into a strafing run on a Japanese destroyer to swiss cheese its artillery guns. Another d-pad push and I'm steering a battleship to lob artillery rounds at an enemy bomber hangar.

For all its tactical complexity, the ease of playing *Battlestations: Pacific* makes managing a fleet of WWII warships and squads of fighter planes a smooth process. Juggling destroyers, bombers, and recon planes shouldn't be this simple, but seamlessly hopping between manually dropping bombs from a plane, repairing an aircraft carrier, and switching to the RTS-lite strategy mode makes it easy to transition between roles.

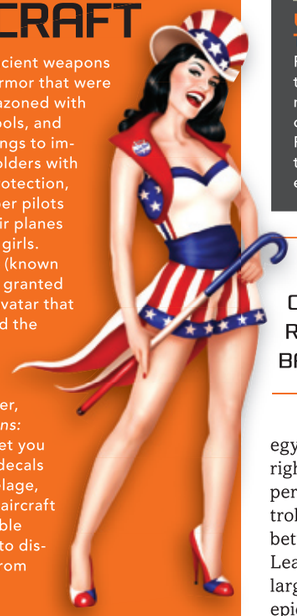
With *Pacific*, Eidos Hungary is iterating on the hybrid gameplay it got mostly right in *Battlestations: Midway*. "Combining strategy with hands-on play puts the player right in the middle of the action, creating a personal connection because players control multiple 'stations' that they can switch between instantly as they see fit," says Lead Designer Botond Szalacsi. "We want large-scale air and sea battles to feel truly epic, where the player feels the risks and rewards they're taking first-hand."

/// Zeroes were the top bird early in WWII. ///

/// Crewmen mill about on deck during battle. ///

ATTRACTIVE AIRCRAFT

Like ancient weapons and armor that were emblazoned with runes, symbols, and other markings to imbue their holders with power or protection, WWII bomber pilots painted their planes with pin-up girls. These icons (known as nose art) granted vessels an avatar that personalized the cold steel the crew flew in. In multiplayer, *Battlestations: Pacific* will let you apply girly decals to your fuselage, giving your aircraft a recognizable gal-banner to distinguish it from your allies.



/// Mary Jane: girlfriend to Spider-Man, and B-17 pilots everywhere. ///

MISSION HIGHLIGHTS

U.S. Campaign — The Battle of Leyte Gulf
Possibly the largest naval battle in history, this decisive stand-off saw the first organized use of Kamikaze attacks and led to the collapse of the Japanese naval power in the Pacific. Players will battle Kamikazes, and trade artillery with the IJN *Musashi*, the largest warship ever built.

Japanese Campaign – Saving the Shoho
The aircraft carrier IJN *Shoho* was a major prize sunk at the Battle of the Coral Sea by U.S. air attack (a 1000lb bomb and seven torpedoes). This mission is set at night in the middle of a thunderstorm. Lightning strikes, heavy cloud cover, and high rolling seas are used to increase the challenge of fighting off U.S. air and sub attacks.

"TOP-DOWN STRATEGY PUTS THE PLAYER OUTSIDE THE BATTLE. COMBINING STRATEGY WITH HANDS-ON PLAY PUTS THE PLAYER RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ACTION OF IMMENSELY LARGE BATTLES." —*BOTOND SZALACSI, LEAD DESIGNER*

***PACIFIC*'S UNIT COUNT** outnumbers *Midway*'s by 20 (for a total of 100) and adds a completely new two-faction campaign. Of the added planes and boats, catapult-launching recon planes and Kamikaze are the most eye-catching; each adds brand-new mechanics for scouting and attacking. In *Midway*'s single-player, a fictional narrative piggybacked to the story of an American officer to tie plot threads between Pearl Harbor and Midway, but Eidos is taking a different approach to *Pacific*. "The story of the original game limited us in many ways," Szalacsi admits. "This time we decided to not use a character to narrate the story. So the answer was to not assign an imaginary role to the player, but to allow the player to experience the whole war and its battles by playing many roles amongst the largest battles in human history."

Being able to play as Americans and Japanese alike is a bonus for WWII buffs looking to re-create history. For those looking to rewrite it, you'll encounter history-revising missions in the campaign like the Battle of Coral Sea. The conflict was a stalemate in reality, but if you're able to overcome the Americans, you'll shift the conflict to Port Morsby, which historians claim would've been the next attack in the Japanese plan to control the Pacific. "We wanted to give players a different point of view, not just another campaign with different units, and we felt that it's important to really win the war as the Japanese—there is no point in winning a game, and losing the war itself," Szalacsi notes.

Four-on-four online multiplayer was one of *Midway*'s biggest draws. Eidos is looking to expand competitive play with more maps and modes, but didn't supply details beyond that. Other promised enhancements: attackers can target individual systems—a well-placed torpedo to the engine will slow a ship to a crawl; setting the ammunition magazine ablaze can spark a larger explo-

:: VITALS :: **GENRE:** ACTION/STRATEGY **DEVELOPER:** EIDOS HUNGARY **PUBLISHER:** EIDOS **URL:** BATTLESTATIONS.NET

NEW UNITS

THREE OF BSP'S 20 NEW PLAYABLE UNITS

J2M Raiden Fighter Plane
Japanese for "Thunderbolt," Raiden fighters cruised at a top speed of more than 380 mph. The allies nicknamed named her "Jack," probably for the J in J2M, but it did have a reputation for being nimble and a great climber. Designed by Mitsubishi (who also created the Zero), Raidens where mainly used against bombers.

F4U Corsair Fighter Plane
Nicknamed the "Bent-Wing Bird" for its distinctive wing design. Fast, sturdy, and arguably the best fighter plane in the war (though Hellcat pilots might disagree). The wings were bent to allow for safer carrier landings–due to the plane's large propeller, the bend allowed for shorter landing wheels and hence safer landings. Later in the war they were equipped with rockets, which are featured in *Battlesations: Pacific*.

BB-57 USS *South Dakota* Battleship
The lead ship of her class, this tough battleship saw two tours in the Pacific in carrier groups and shore bombardments seeing action at the battle of Santa Cruz, Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Okinawa, and more. Featured in both U.S. and Japanese single-player campaigns, players will fight with and survive this battleship's considerable power. Players can catapult-launch *KingFisher* recon planes from the battleship's deck.

/// Yes, dogfighters, there's a cockpit camera. Clouds can be used for visual cover, too. ///

/// Units show multiple stages of disintegration. Enough torpedoes can split seacraft in two. ///

sion. Challenges like timed bonus objectives and island capturing are also in; soften up an outpost's bunkers and emplacements, then hit the beach with some transport ships to take control of any airfields, AA, or other facilities left standing.

SZALACSI SAYS THAT THE most important feature to Eidos is easing the player's transition between combat roles, and shedding some of *Midway*'s interface issues (like nested repair menus) should help with that. "Accessibility was a key objective for us. Players will now be able to carry out commands and control their units faster with more intuitive and effective mechanisms. The whole damage and repair system is revised—we're aiming for a system where you can feel the complexity of a huge battleship, but still take quick and effective action to save your vessel."

Pacific also benefits from a sea-to-sky visual revamp. The fresh coat of high-resolution textures, lighting, animations, and effects are immediately noticeable: ships capsize, explosions bloom like orange cauliflower, and lush pacific flora lines the islands and atolls. Underwater modeling, HDR effects, heat distortion, and glare add bells and whistles, and a volumetric cloud system lines the sky with enough fluffy weather to let you use it for cover during dogfights.

Naval combat isn't known for being accessible or action-oriented, but *Battlestations: Pacific* is an opportunity for Eidos to refine the good it did with *Midway* and carve out a welcoming middle-ground between hands-on warfare and strategy.

/// EVAN LAHTI ///

:HOPES/FEARS ::

+ Ideally, it's the just the right amount of tactics to make seafarers feel in control, but enough turrets and bombing runs to keep the action high.

– Will babysitting your ships and fighter squads be kept to a minimum? Aquaman has publicly condemned unlimited ammo for depth charges.

/// We'd take run-ins with radioactive rats over waves of cookie-cutter bad guys any day. ///

METRO 2033

RELEASE DATE: FALL 2009

:: COMRADE-IATION

If the waves made by *BioShock* are still rippling within the industry, *Metro 2033* may be the first game to wash ashore. The setup: In 2011, a worldwide nuclear catastrophe decimated civilization. Moscow citizens retreated to the tubes, building a network of city-states along the underground subways to avoid the surface, where radiation spawned breeds of psychic supermutants: sedan-sized bats and rats, hulking ogres, and ghostly anomalies.

These abominations have kept humanity hiding under the covers for two decades, and during our demo, they had me checking the walls for a nite-light, too. I was introduced to the docile-sounding "librarians" while walking through a library's ruined reference section (with no printing presses, books become very valuable in *Metro*)—the creatures are vicious if you try to hammer the trigger, but won't attack as long as you keep looking directly at them. Just when I thought I'd safely crept away, a winged beast plucked one of our comrades and crashed back through a window, throwing him outside.

/// A minimized HUD helps immersion: the wristwatch shows when to swap your oxygen canister, and the LED flashes if you're being loud. ///

ASIDE FROM THE BEASTS,

4A is focusing on forging what it calls "emotional believability." Simple features are used to drive immersion, like using a handheld journal to plot routes and mark objectives, jabbing yourself with a syringe to restore health, and watching your gas mask slowly frost up when you're wandering the surface. All of this has us hopeful for what 4A Games is shooting for: a *Half-Life*-like, narrative-focused experience similar but wildly different from the apocalyptic PC game many members of the dev team helped create in 2007, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl*.

:: VITALS :: **GENRE:** FPS **DEVELOPER:** 4A GAMES **PUBLISHER:** THQ **URL:** WWW.4A-GAMES.COM

METRO 2033 Q&A

ANDREW PROKHOROV

Creative Director at 4A Games

What aspects of *Metro* will make it stand out among other shooters?
Our idea is that no single feature can create a game, no matter how interesting this feature is. The unique atmosphere of the game is needed. A game becomes enjoyable only when I forget that I'm playing a videogame, when I put myself in a character's place, when I believe I live in his world. If a player laughs with game characters, if he feels like he's suffocating in the real world while his character is suffocating in a gas mask with worn-out filters on the surface of a ruined city, if he feels the breath coming from a monster's mouth—then we've reached our goal.

What are the strengths of the graphics engine you've developed?
There isn't a single static light source; basically, light bulbs "shake and break." The number of light sources in a frame is limited by common sense, not by programmers. But fully dynamic lighting isn't an end in itself, it allows us to create the game in the process of playing it, without wasting time on recalculation of lightmaps, shadows, and other stuff. We also use visualization technology to give the game a film-like image, and we're adding 64-bit HDR with eye adaptation, depth of field, motion blur, and PhysX.

What homemade weapons and tools can players expect to wield in the apocalypse?
There are quite a lot of them—a revolver that can be upgraded to a carbine, a multi-barreled crossbow, and an air-powered rifle. There is also a self-made machine gun (despised by our publisher) called Bastard. It works awfully, always jamming and making players feel like throwing it away! The transportation in *Metro* deserves special mention: trolleys that range from basic to muscle-powered to underground tanks.

/// As in *BioShock*, conserving ammo and combat items will be a focus. ///

It's encouraging to see one less developer feeling the pressure to shoehorn a multiplayer mode into its story-driven shooter, and we're hoping an atmospheric, personal single-player experience will emerge as a result.

/// EVAN LAHTI ///

:: HOPES/FEARS ::

+ Unconventional enemies and design inside a BioShocky, insulated setting. Impressive lighting and engine tech. Homemade weapons that we hope will be customizable.

– We only saw a few snow-covered surface stages to contrast the underground gameplay. Giving players outdoor areas will be key.

PC GAMER PRESENTS

THE TOP 9 OF 09

DIABLO III

More than just a new dimension to a classic hack 'n' slash

When Blizzard showed off Diablo III for the first time at the developer's World Wide Invitational 2008 in Paris, France, more than a few long-time fans of the franchise experienced self-induced strokes at the sight of some of the revamped features. Change, after all, is difficult to cope with. But, having experienced this new world of evil and decay that Blizzard has painstakingly built from scratch, Diablo III is change we can believe in.

Diablo III's custom game engine imbues environments with nearly as much character as your avatar and your foes. Loose floor stones can be smashed to recover loot, walls collapse into rubble, and if you're really pissed, go ahead and blow that giant pillar into lethal chunks raining down onto the heads of your enemies.

Of course, you can still go the traditional route and hack bodies apart in a spectacular shower of blood (but keep in mind that the occasional zombie torso might come crawling after you just as you're wiping the goo off your shoes). The improved combat pays off in the most satisfying ways, including a *WoW*-style hotbar that gives you fast access to multiple abilities and potions, effectively making you much more powerful. Now you can weed out the weak enemies with a flaming skull ranged attack, raise a wall of zombies to fend off the next wave, and then blast the stragglers with one of the most bad-ass spells we've ever seen: firing off a wide cone of flaming bats in the faces of your enemies until they crumble to ash.

Will *Diablo III* actually hit in 2009? Given that Blizzard only announced the game in June, and this is Blizzard we're talking about here (the legendary developer has a habit of delaying games until they're just right), we're not so sure. But Blizzard hasn't ruled it out—call us foolish optimists.

GENRE: Action RPG
DEV: Blizzard
PUB: Blizzard
ETA: 2009
X-FACTOR: Flaming bats

ROB PARDO: WORLDCRAFTER

Blizzard's Executive Vice President of Game Design talks to PC Gamer about StarCraft 2, Blizzard fever, and The Next Big Thing

PC Gamer: How do you determine your role in all the projects that you're involved in?
Rob Pardo: It depends on what the project needs. Right now, I'm probably spending more time on *StarCraft 2* than I am on, say, *World of Warcraft*—we've really built up that team in terms of processes and procedures, and I just meet with [the developers] a couple times a week now and help them with hard design problems and concepts, but they're pretty much good to go. And on *StarCraft 2* I'm really involved on the design of the Battle.net feature set and a lot of the single player story stuff. On *Diablo 3* I'm the executive producer—Jay [Lead Designer Jay Wilson] always wants me in more design meetings, but he's got a handle on it, so I'll probably get more involved with *Diablo 3* once it gets a little closer to release.

/// What hath Rob Pardo wrought? ///

Now that *StarCraft 2* has been established as a trilogy, how many missions can players expect within each game?
About 25-30—which is why we made that decision. If you look at the original *StarCraft*, if I remember correctly, it was 32 missions, 12 for Terrans and 10 for [the Zerg and Protoss]. And then the *Brood War* expansion was eight per race, or 24 missions. So we're kind of in between *Brood War* and *StarCraft* for each of the packs. We [wanted to hit] that 25-30 mission mark because that's what we felt like was a good amount of content for the players. But the story we wanted to tell, and the ideas we had for the single player campaign, meant that it'd amount to ten missions per race, and that just didn't feel right. That's where we made the tough decision that OK, let's just put it into three separate boxes. And it's really the same model as the past, but with an extra expansion set.

But we really want it to *feel* like a trilogy. We don't want it to feel like you're getting the epic saga and then the two add-ons, right? We want it to feel like *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *Return of the King*.

> "Everyone was really excited about *[Star Wars Galaxies]*, and in some ways we dodged a bullet because it just didn't catch on."

The subscription model is a pretty unassailable solution to piracy. Are there any other approaches out there that you think are also working?
I don't necessarily think that the subscription model is what's combating piracy. The reason we've been successful on PC is because we offer extremely compelling multiplayer element to our games, *WoW* being the most obvious, of course. But all of our games, a lot of the longevity in the game is the compelling multiplayer, and if you want to play on Battle.net—which I think is one of, if not the best gaming service on the planet—then you have to have a legitimate CD key, so that just cuts out all the piracy right there.
That's what's unfortunate about the PC business. For many companies, the most compelling part of their product is the single player, or the *only* part of the product is the single player. At that point, they're forced to use some sort of heavy-handed DRM solution. It's difficult right now for them.

As you work on *StarCraft 2* and *Diablo 3*, are you taking any inspiration from fan-created materials, such as mods or characters?
Absolutely. I don't know if there are any specifics, but [we] take inspiration from everything to be honest, even [other developer's] triple-A games and console games. I love the casual games space, it's just becoming so vibrant, and there are so many interesting ideas.

And it's also interesting watching how they influence each other. We've been watching some of the core mods that came out of *Warcraft 3* community and observing how they've gone into different permutations. I'm pretty sure all the tower defense games originated in *Warcraft 3*, it's the first time I ever saw them, and now I see them [everywhere]. We're pretty big believers in that stuff. I wish we could've done it with *Diablo 3*, but we're not going to be able to ship an editor with that. But maybe one day in the future we'll do that with one of our RPG games too.

Is there anything out there on the horizon that makes you think *"Hm...that could be the next* World of Warcraft*?"*
I don't know yet. *The Old Republic* MMO just got announced, and I think that has a ton of potential. It's so early right now that I don't really know what to think of it, but those guys are really, really talented, and they have a phenomenal license.
I always thought that *Star Wars Galaxies* was going to beat us to the punch, because that game came out before *[World of Warcraft]* and it had some amazing buzz around it. Everyone was really excited about it, and in some ways we dodged a bullet because it just didn't catch on, and then we were able to come in and really be the top MMO. But we'll get knocked off. I just hope that we knock ourselves off.

Immortals' high-powered shields only activate when a heavy attack makes impact, making them mortal enemies of Terran Siege Tanks.

The Terran commander should've dropped a few supply depots here to block enemy ground units. In SC2, depots can collapse to let units pass over them, letting them function as a cheap, retractable wall.

Siege Tanks can hunker down and deploy to increase their range and firepower, letting them double as defense turrets.

STARCRAFT II: WINGS OF LIBERTY

The stars get craftier

In a way, the decade of bottled up restraint, canceled spin-offs, and lack of sequels is what's most exciting about StarCraft II. Waiting more than 10 years to revisit the Zerg, Protoss, and Terrans shows Blizzard's respect for the franchise, and this reverence permeates the sequel's design, from the fine-tuned roster of simple-but-nuanced units each race is allowed, to the intricate animations that bring battles to life. A vibrant color palette communicates unit types at a microsecond's glance, and when the arc welder of a boxy SCV constructor flicker-crackles and its pilot reports "job's done" in a casual, southern drawl, it makes building bunkers a satisfying task.

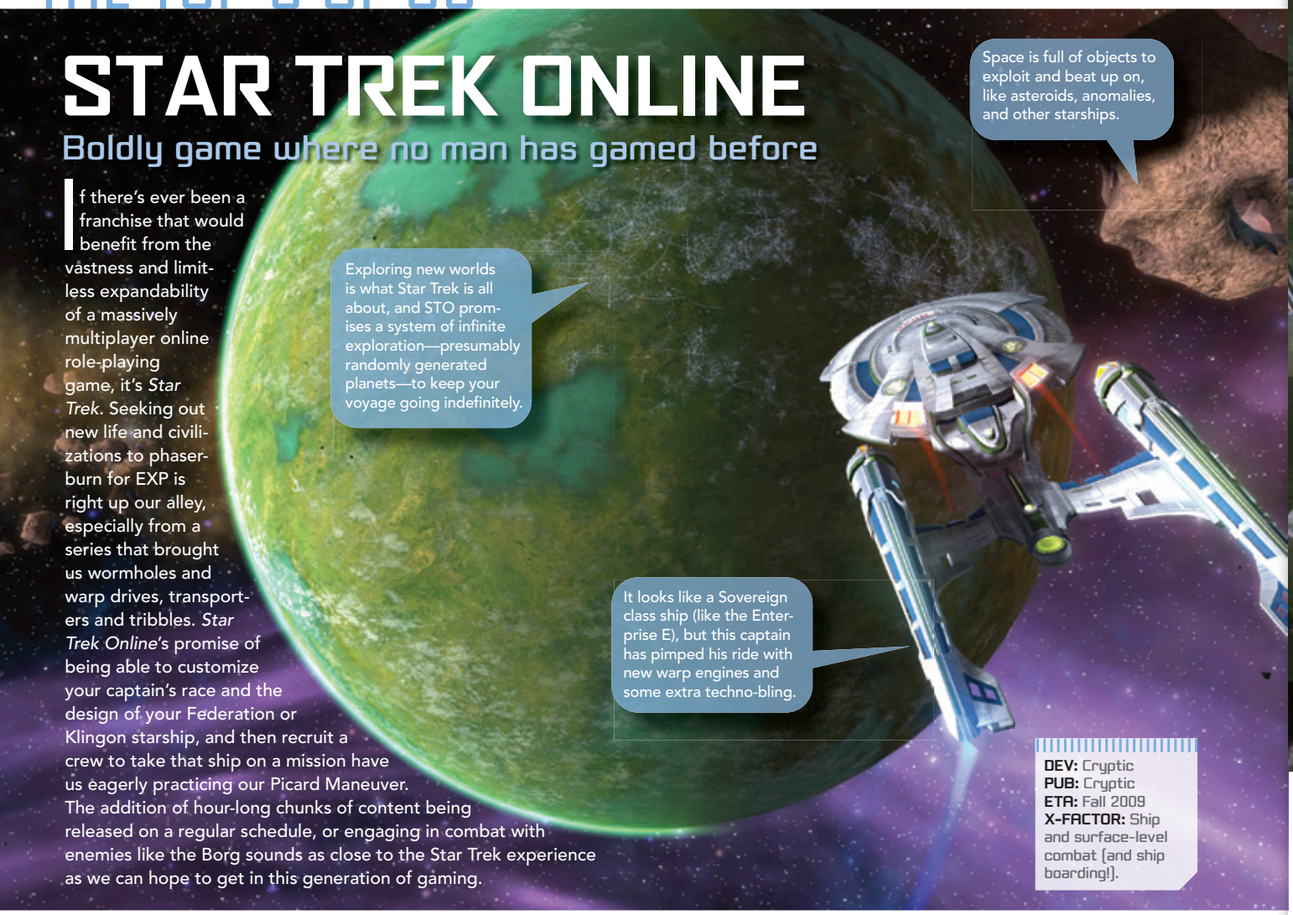
More encouraging is *StarCraft II*'s focus on story—Jim Raynor's battlecruiser serves as your mobile base in Wings of Liberty, vith fully-rendered versions of your crew waiting inside to chat up between missions. Point-and-clicking around the bridge, cantina, and other areas digs up bits of lore; you can purchase units and upgrades through your engineering deck, or pull up the galactic map to choose which missions to take, which adds re-playability to *Wings of Liberty* while we await the release of the Pross and Zerg campaigns.

GENRE: RTS
DEV: Blizzard
PUB: Blizzard
ETA: Q2 2009
X-FACTOR: Strong story mode for an RTS, with a rich narrative and lore.

STAR TREK ONLINE

Boldly game where no man has gamed before

If there's ever been a franchise that would benefit from the vastness and limitless expandability of a massively multiplayer online role-playing game, it's *Star Trek*. Seeking out new life and civilizations to phaser-burn for EXP is right up our alley, especially from a series that brought us wormholes and warp drives, transporters and tribbles. *Star Trek Online*'s promise of being able to customize your captain's race and the design of your Federation or Klingon starship, and then recruit a crew to take that ship on a mission have us eagerly practicing our Picard Maneuver. The addition of hour-long chunks of content being released on a regular schedule, or engaging in combat with enemies like the Borg sounds as close to the Star Trek experience as we can hope to get in this generation of gaming.



DEV: Cryptic
PUB: Cryptic
ETA: Fall 2009
X-FACTOR: Ship and surface-level combat (and ship boarding!).

ONLINE IN '09

The future of gaming on the intarwebs

Steam

Steam is the undisputed leader in the online gaming arena, but Valve isn't waiting around for competitors to catch up. In November, Valve rolled out Steam Cloud, a new add-on to the service that stores your profile's saved games and preferences (like keyboard configurations) online, so that when you log in from another computer and download *Left 4 Dead* you don't have to rebind voice chat to your mouse's thumb button. Valve is also planning features such as auto-updating your video drivers (about time!) and automatically checking your PC to make sure you meet a game's system requirements before you purchase it.

GoG.com

Currently in public beta and boasting a growing selection of games from years past, GoG (short for Good Old Games) will launch for real in 2009. What sets GoG apart from the rest of the crowd is its focus on classic games, such as *Fallout*, *Unreal Tournament*, *Sacred*, and more, all offered up for low prices ($5.99 to $9.99) and without digital rights management (DRM) that might prevent you from enjoying them years from now. Many games also include extras such as a PDF manual, icon art, wallpapers, MP3s from the game's soundtrack, and more. Your account also serves as a social network, putting you in touch with hundreds of other classic game fans.

XFire

Xfire packs all the services you'd expect in a stand-alone social games app—a buddy list that can link you up with friends in multiplayer games, voice chat, in-game IM, stat tracking, clan managment—plus the recently added ability to take screenshots and video, and even broadcast live video of your matches.

Impulse

Impulse enters Phase 3 this year, which will include a vastly expanded selection of games including Stardock's own *Demigod* as well as games from THQ, 2K, and Atari, as well as Impulse Reactor multiplayer technology that removes the need to open ports on your router to make multiplayer games work properly, enhanced matchmaking, "cloud" storage (similar to Steam Cloud). Impulse will also support for free and paid micro-expansions, such as *Sins of a Solar Empire's Entrenchment*.

Games for Windows Live

Games for Windows Live, now a free service, got its first update in November of last year, which changed the interface from a straight knockoff of the Xbox Live version to something more PC-friendly, and debuted a desktop client that serves as a gateway to the (somewhat limited) downloadable content available through Microsoft's Marketplace. The feature set hasn't grown since launch (it offers multiplayer matching, achievement tracking, voice chat, and basic friends list functionality,) but Microsoft has promised to continue to update the service. And now that the service is free, expect many more games (such as *Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War II*) to take advantage of its multiplayer matching abilities.

DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

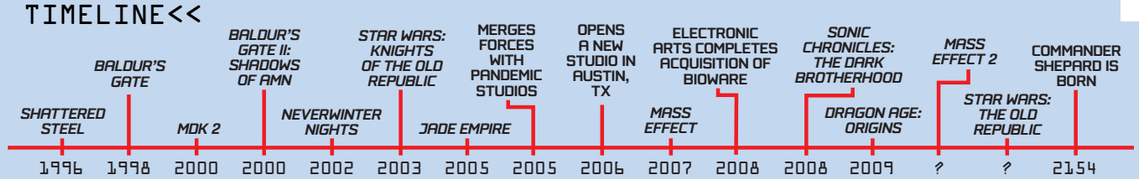
Something old, something new in the spiritual sequel to Baldur's Gate

Dialog trees, party-based pausable combat, choose-your-own morality branching narratives—in its 13-year history, BioWare has been refining core RPG elements with each franchise it's produced, grinding away impurities to deliver polished, personal role-playing. We're particularly stoked about Dragon Age's emphasis on your character's origin story—before you get your gauntlets on the main quest, a three-hour section establishes your character's history with a few formative decisions. Your selected race and class determines your starting point within the campaign, and party recruits will hinge on whether you've aligned yourself as a hero, martyr, or tyrant.

Fans of *Neverwinter Nights* should pay heed: *Dragon Age* will include toolset for creating campaigns that you'll be able to share publicly with other users. But it's spell combos and the promising AI tooling (such as "programming" party members to auto-heal you if your health drops below 30 percent) that bring a modern touch to the classic pausable combat and promise to make *Dragon Age: Origins* another high point in BioWare's campaign to elevate the RPG.

DEV: BioWare
PUB: EA
ETA: Q2 2009
X-FACTOR: LOTR-like non-linear fantasy with choices aplenty.

>>BIOWARE TIMELINE<<



WARHAMMER 40K: DAWN OF WAR II

Real-time strategy that's as beautiful as it is bloody

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II is an effort to push the real-time strategy genre forward on almost every level. First, it transfers DoW's ridiculously brutal and bloody combat to Relic's astonishing Essence engine (the same one that powers Company of Heroes), allowing for insane detail, destructible terrain, and an emphasis on cover-based combat that makes using the environment to your advantage crucial to success. It also shifts focus away from base building and toward managing a smaller number of units, adds "War Gear" loot drops to the mix that can be picked up or earned during battles and equipped to specialize each of your squad leaders, and a dynamic campaign system that allows you to choose when and where to fight. And, of course, Relic has finally added the fan-favorite and fearsome Tyrannids to the mix, making the inevitable bloodbath that much more intense.

With Relic's proven RTS design abilities and top-tier technology, there isn't a question of whether *DoWII* will be a great game—it's just a matter of *how* great.

GENRE: RTS
DEV: Relic
PUB: THQ
ETA: February 2009
X-FACTOR: Visceral combat

F.E.A.R. 2: PROJECT ORIGIN

The return of gaming's creepiest acronym

The follow-up to our favorite punctuation-heavy shooter (sorry, S.T.A.L.K.E.R.) will deliver more variety—less of the identical cubicles and warehouse spaces you battled through in the first game, F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin reveals more of the city that Armacham's Alma experiment (the titular Project Origin) reduced to ruins. Already, we've seen settings creepier than Steve Buscemi reading a romance novel to schoolchildren, like a hospital, abandoned school and nuclear facility. These areas are a more fitting playground for our favorite underage terror, who Monolith says will be a more tangible presence.

If the sequel can successfully replicate the brilliant, dynamic AI that powered the clone soldiers we shot up in slow-mo in *F.E.A.R.*, and inject a steady stream of even more disorienting haunts from Alma, we'll be satisfied, but other additions, like suiting up in a bipedal mech to spit some scares back at your enemies, have us anticipating *F.E.A.R. 2* as a shooter that brings a perfect balance of horror atmosphere and great gunplay.

GENRE: FPS
DEV: Monolith
PUB: Warner Bros.
ETA: Q1 2009
X-FACTOR: Best-of-class smartypants AI.

THE SIMS 3

It's not such a small world, after all

Going from playing *The Sims 2* to *The Sims 3* will be a revelation for the millions of fans of the living dollhouse series. While the visual upgrade appears to be relatively small (Sims *do* look significantly better, but due to the cartoony style, the improvements don't jump out at you), the real difference is that your Sims will no longer be contained in their homes—they'll be able to roam freely around the surrounding town, travelling from home to work to the park to the store, all without pausing for one of *The Sims 2*'s interminable loading screens. The entire neighborhood is in motion, with dozens of Sims going about their business, socializing, and even raising families on their own, but to make any real progress in their lives and realize their dreams and goals, they'll need your help.

For more on *The Sims 3*, turn to page 14 for our exclusive first hands-on!

Genre: Simulation
Dev: EA
PUB: EA
ETA: February 2009
X-FACTOR: A living neighborhood

DEUS EX 3

A new beginning for a classic game

Following an act like the magnificent Deus Ex is a difficult task—as proven by 2003's poorly received sequel, Deus Ex: Invisible War. Eidos Montreal's plans for this second attempt to do justice to the DX name are bold and ambitious; call us suckers, but we're looking forward to it.

Deus Ex 3 will be a prequel, set in the world that will eventually crumble into factions for and against the augmentations that made *DX* so memorable. *Deus Ex 3* explores the beginnings of human augmentation, where the additions are prosthetics that will both the physical abilities and the appearance of the user, and the world has to come to terms with people being better, stronger, and faster. As a security guard at a bio-mechanical augmentations lab overrun by special ops, you'll play a key role in how these events unfold.

The original's role-playing elements are still there, but the game will also recognize a player's gaming skills, so that skilled first-person shooter players, for example, will not be frustrated by their character's inability to hit the broad side of a barn. And this time, stealth is dependent on physical cover, so you'll need use the environment to mask your movements rather than just your stats.

Controversial? Anything to do with a game as beloved as *Deus Ex* always is, and especially after the *IW* debacle, fans are a bit nervous. But there's a new *Deus Ex* game coming out, and that's a name that gives us augmented tingles.

GENRE: FPS/RPG
DEVELOPER: Eidos Montreal
PUBLISHER: Eidos
ETA: Late 2009
X-FACTOR: Augmentations

These ships are so detailed that you can see the crew running around on the deck, and flying off of it when cannonballs hit.

The campaign, titled "The Road to Independence," puts you in control of the American colonies leading up to the Revolutionary War.

You'll be commanding an entire fleet of ships into battle.

EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR

Conquering the world, now by land and sea

With Empire: Total War, Creative Assembly is delivering not just the most advanced Total War game ever, but expanding it in scope by 50 percent with the new naval warfare mode joining the turn-based empire-building and the land-based real-time strategy modes.

If you tire of the Americas, Europe and India await your conquest as well.

The mighty ships of the 18th century are a very different experience from what we're used to; it's far more about positioning, timing and teamwork. In a multiplayer battle (which is now managed through Steam's matching service) we played as the Dutch allied with the Spanish against a British and French fleet, and discovered it was far more effective to coordinate an attack on a single enemy ship and batter it with the full range of cannons, rather than take the full brunt of the enemy armada at once. Wind, too, plays its part; real-world sailing experience will pay off when tacking into a headwind.

It's a very complex and tactical experience, and this is just one third of the total, enormous game. The wait won't be much longer, though—*Empire* is so close, we can taste the cordite. Look for the review very, very soon.

PUB: Sega
DEV: Creative Assembly
ETA: February 2009
X-FACTOR: War on the high seas

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

WESTERN GAMES INDUSTRY BEWARE: THE FORMER SOVIET EMPIRE IS COMING FOR YOU. /// BY JIM ROSSIGNOL ///

By now, most gamers are familiar with the burgeoning game development scene in the East, much of which has been reported in the pages of this very magazine. We've seen games such as *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, *Perimeter*, *Cossacks*, *Soldiers: Heroes of World War II*, *Space Rangers 2*, and *Pathologic* cause something of a stir. These games aren't revolutions in any classic sense—there's no *Half-Life* or *World of Warcraft* among them—but their methods and themes are often offbeat, and distinctly Eastern.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.'s influences are obvious: Chernobyl, and Russian hard science-fiction. *Perimeter*'s iconoclastic RTS is steeped in Russian independence, too—deliberately exploding the idea of what resources mean in an RTS and reveling in a fiction that's weird by anyone's standards.

The reason we're seeing so much of this esoterica coming from Russia is that these are small studios, that cost little to run, and they can make precisely what they choose. I asked one Russian games boss why Russian games were so different and he laughed, replying "Russian developers all want to make a new *Fallout*!" And you can see what he means. Russians do have something of a grim outlook: what better to capture that than the greatest of the post-apocalyptic RPGs? My Russian comrade continued: "Our studios lack management skills....We're too young as an industry." I wondered about that. Too young, or just young enough? I've lost count of the number of times weird, obsessive projects have been stifled or cancelled by our mature, experienced Western managers. That's

Continued on Page 42 >>

1

EXODUS FROM THE EARTH
■ St Petersburg ■ Parallax Arts Studio
■ www.partstudio.com
Sci-fi shooter...with a second Earth.

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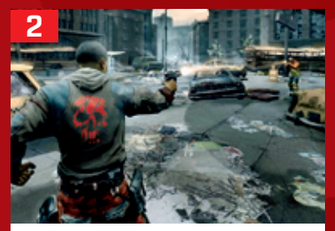

CRIMECRAFT
■ Kiev ■ Vogster ■ www.crimecraft.com
Enormously ambitious crime-centered MMO with no good guys. *Unreal* engine-powered and free to play.

3

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: CLEAR SKY
■ Kiev ■ GSC GameWorld
■ www.gsc-game.com
The *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* prequel: bold and beautiful apocalyptic exploration.

4

TENSION
■ Moscow ■ Ice Pick Lodge
■ www.snipurl.com/76xge
Combat via painting. Sex and Russian weirdness meet the methods of Okami.

5

AGE OF PIRATES: CAPTAIN BLOOD
■ Moscow ■ Sea Dog
■ snipurl.com/76wjf
Ludicrous action in the *God of War* vein.

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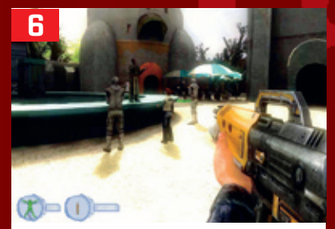


PRECURSORS
■ Kiev ■ Deep Shadows
■ www.precursors-game.com
Boiling Point in space. Possibly the most ambitious game in development.

7

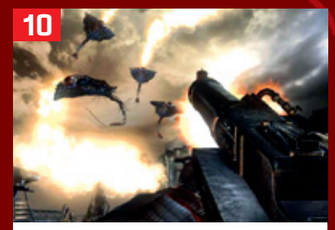
UNDERWATER WARS
■ Moscow ■ Biart Studio
■ www.uwar-game.com
Far Cry with scuba gear. War in the sea around a tropical island. Harpoons for all.

8

MEN OF WAR
■ Severodonetsk, Ukraine ■ Best Way
■ snipurl.com/2c73e
Quite possibly the ultimate wargame. A magnificently realistic and detailed RTS.

9

THE MADDOX FLIGHT SIM
■ Moscow ■ 1C
■ www.1C.ru/eng
The *Il-2 Sturmovik* team are now working on a new game. No title confirmed as yet.

10


NECROVISION
■ Gliwice, Poland ■ The Farm 51
■ www.thefarm51.com
"A meat shooter," 1C called it. Classic shotgun FPS from the *Painkiller* crew.

11

DEATH TRACK
■ Voronezh ■ SkyFallen Entertainment
■ www.skyfallen.com
Car racing in a post-apocalyptic future. Guns and lasers come as standard.

12

MAJESTY 2
■ Krasnodar ■ Ino-Co
■ www.ino-co.com/en
Ogre action in a fantasy kingdom sim. Could be one of Russia's best RTS games.

13

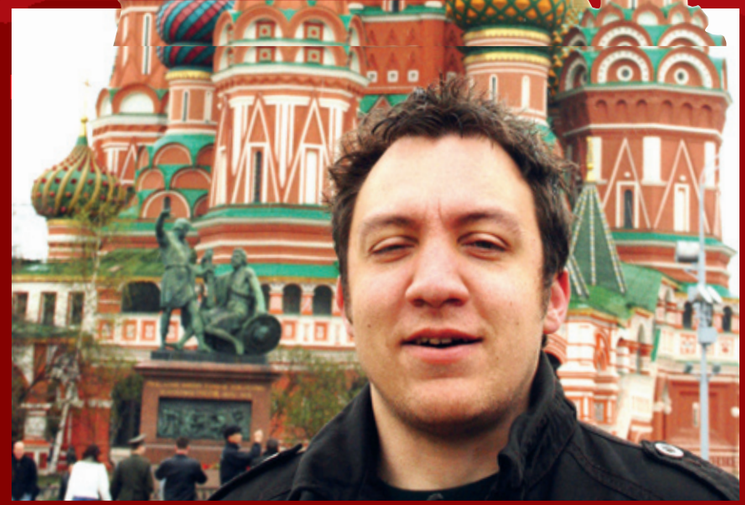
CRYOSTASIS
■ Kiev ■ Action Forms
■ www.cryostasis-game.com
Russia's answer to *BioShock*. Weird, frozen, and filled with flashbacks.

"RUSSIAN DEVS ALL WANT TO MAKE THE NEW FALLOUT"

<< Continued from Page 40

definitely not happening in Russia.

But there's more to the Eastern gaming industry than mere schools of management: there's a pioneering spirit to these Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian projects. For the most part these are gamers given the chance to do what they please, and you can see the gamer archetypes breaking through. In some places an obsession with detail and realism overwhelms, in such games as *Soldiers: Heroes of World War II*. Elsewhere there are games that deal with the existential horror faced by these under-developed, often poisoned post-Soviet Union nations: *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, *Pathologic*, *Cryostasis*. Elsewhere again there's a simple joy in the classic tropes of gaming, such as in *Fantasy Wars* or *IL-2 Sturmovik*. Both creatively and financially, this is a new generation of developers who love what they're doing, and who can and will take risks with their work—an asset that's rapidly being lost in many hyper-managed Western development teams.



/// The best way to enjoy Red Square is to be massively hungover, like this. ///

INTO THE COSMOS

The Cosmos Hotel in Moscow is a formidable sight. The huge, curving high-rise is a classic of 1970s Soviet architecture and would not look out of place in a Bond movie. Inside it's all curved, wood-paneled corridors, patrolled by aproned maids with grimacing faces. The open foyer and gift shop are all faux space-race credentials (a neon sign reading: "Welcome, Yuri Gagarin Bar!") and Vegas-style slot machines. Stepping out of its heavy glass doors you're greeted by the domed rooftops of the national exhibition centre, a giant sculpture of a rocket heading for the skies, and miles beyond, a vast, brutalist television tower that would not look out of place in City 17. Suddenly, *Half-Life 2*'s Citadel has a real-world cousin, and Russia seems to live up to its reputation. This is the location for KRI, Russia's own game developer conference. Most of the games being developed in the former USSR and the surrounding countries are being shown here. There could be no better venue.

In many ways it's a typical games show, with peculiarly clad ladies (some dressed in silken air-hostess uniforms, others in little more than paint) dispensing flyers and mild embarrassment on the show floor. It's a kind of validation of the size and scale of the Russian games industry as it exists today. There are technology stands, and game stands, of all sizes. While 1C might dominate the publishing side of things, there are plenty of independent studios operating their own projects here. Everyone wants to have a say, to see and be seen, and to stake their claim on Moscow's gaming consciousness.

I wander around and get to play a few games. *Death Track* is ludicrous: a kind of

/// Moscow: a mix of old and new architecture, and terrifyingly random traffic. ///

RUSSIA

14 Vladivostok

14

KING'S BOUNTY
■ Vladivostok ■ Katauri Interactive
■ www.katauri.com
Readily compared with *HOMM4*, but looking far more flexible and interesting.

EASTERN STARS The Russian developers to watch

ACTION FORMS
■ **Developing: *Cryostasis***
OK, so their last game, *Vivisector*, sucked, but Action Forms are doing some unique and beautiful with the frozen, memory-travelling shooter, *Cryostasis*. It's looking like another Soviet singularity.

BEST WAY
■ **Developing: *Men of War***
No studio in the world can truly be said to rival Best Way for their dedication to the World War II wargame/RTS. These guys can talk about penetration damage and mean it.

DEEP SHADOWS
■ **Developing: *Precursors, White Gold***
Boiling Point was one of the buggiest games ever, and was both loved and hated by gamers. Deep Shadows' two new games are twice as ambitious: ride sharks, fight space robots.

Continued on Page 45 >>

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

/// It seems Russian developers are quite interested in making money from their work... ///

brutal rally version of *Wipeout*, with post-apocalyptic capital cities to race around and cars decked out with lasers. I sit down and play for several laps, and get flashbacks to the end of the '90s, when futuristic racers turned up on the shelves every few weeks. Later I'm demoed the ultra-realistic *Men of War*—it blows me away as I raze buildings, Tiger tanks, and Nazis. Then there's *Captain Blood*: a game that lives up to its name with *God of War* violence and caricatured ship-to-ship combat. It's remarkably polished, and ready for the consoles.

Also a surprise is hybrid-RPG *King's Bounty*. It's a game comparable to the most recent *Heroes of Might and Magic* game, and yet surpassing it on all fronts. The turn-based battles are dominated by vast monsters, reminiscent of *Final Fantasy* games, while the world-wandering is so vast and intricate that you can even add a wife and child to your inventory. Be careful she doesn't divorce you—she'll take half your gold. I marvel at it, wondering why we see so few of these kinds of games today: surely they're our answer to the ultra-stylized Japanese RPGs?

The star of the show, however, is *Cryostasis*. It plays like Ukraine's answer to *BioShock*. The opening minutes of the game see you stumbling through a raging blizzard to get to the frozen ship inside which most of the game will be played. The showpieces are the flashbacks into which your character stumbles, deliriously, as you struggle through the game. Touch someone's corpse and you get to relive their final minutes, and play through sections of the game on the ship as it was before it became marooned and haunted in its arctic grave. A game that plays with memory, distorts time and reality, and makes you care about staying warm. It's fascinating, and exhilaratingly violent. *Cryostasis* shows just how aggressive the former Soviets are being in their reinvention of classic game designs.

Then there's the stand with a couple of developers who can't speak English. Their work is all in Cyrillic Russian, and I have no idea what the name of the game is. They're demoing a game where six-armed mutants are exploding each other with energy pulses. I later learn that these guys are students, desperately trying to sell their first game, which doesn't even have a name—it's called something along the lines of "our game project 2008." I wonder if the world will ever see that bizarre little experiment brought to the market. In Russia, you might expect that we will.

13 TONS

All this is engrossing and exciting, but it's only a fragment of what Russia taught me. This new frontier for the games industry isn't simply a problem of creativity and design, it's a logistical problem. This is the biggest country in the world with 142 million people have spread out over an enormous 6.6 million square miles. It's an eight-day train journey from Moscow to Vladivostok, where the *King's Bounty* team reside. They couldn't make it to KRI for that very reason.

What's more, it's a place where publishers must do battle with the problems of distribution and rampant retail piracy. Here in the States we might get upset about torrent sites and online theft, but up until a few years ago most games sold in Russia were pirate copies sold as packaged products on the street. The cost of broadband meant, for the larger part, it was cheaper to buy pirate games. The main company engaged in tackling all this is 1C, a publisher we know for games, but in Russia it ships all kinds of more practical software—Cyrillic-language accounting programs and so forth. 1C ship a staggering 13 tons of software every day, of which 98% is games. In the games arena, 1C is peerless, publishing Microsoft and Electronic Arts games, as well as promoting their own homegrown materials. Unlike Western publishers, they even run their own software shops, which are scattered across Moscow and the other large cities of Russia. There are now 280 1C-owned shops, and another 4,000 franchises operating with the 1C license in 600 locations across the former Soviet bloc. It's a gigantic operation, and one that is making its owners wealthy.

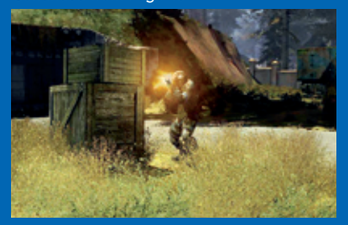
These street-level shops, it turns out, are one of the most important ways in which the company are taking on Russia's key problem: piracy. Gaming in Russia is around 70% PC-based, so it was relatively easy for the pirates to gain the upper hand, selling copied games for a few dollars in the same subway stalls where people buy cigarettes, cans of Coke, and handy pocket-sized bottles of vodka. 1C knew it had to combat this practice aggressively,

"1C WENT ALL THE WAY TO PRESIDENT PUTIN"

/// The view from the Cosmos hotel, showing *Half-Life 2*'s Citadel. ///

EASTERN STARS Heroes of tomorrow, continued ...

Continued from Page 43 >>



GSC GAMEWORLD

■ Developing: *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Clear Sky*

The unquestioned stars of the scene, GSC Gameworld conquered strategy with *Cossacks* and are now causing a revolution in the FPS scene with their Chernobyl-based games. Great things ahead.

KATAURI

■ Developing: *King's Bounty*

Space Rangers 2 was one of those games that will be lost to time: a perfect, beautiful legend of a game that was far cleverer than it should have been. Hopefully *King's Bounty* will be remembered.

ICE PICK LODGE

■ Developing: *Tension*

Pathologic, the first Ice Pick Lodge game, was about as close as we've come to an existentialist masterpiece in gaming. The new game, *Tension*, is about painting via combat. We can't wait.

and its approach was dual-pronged. By creating a retail business that offered the same kind of prices as the pirates while providing an enormously superior service and shopping environment, it made the legitimate product more attractive than the pirated version.

The other side of the coin was a little darker. The pirates were making a lot of money and weren't likely to be stopped easily. They were mass-producing packaged copies that looked like real games, and were competing directly with the actual, licensed publishers for commercial product. 1C went all the way to President Vladimir Putin. The former KGB man soon realized just what value this burgeoning industry would be to his vast, developing country. The punishment for commercial piracy is now up to seven years in prison. A Russian prison. As disincentives go, it's a good one.

With 300 people a year now jailed for software theft, piracy is rapidly disappearing in the major cities of Russia. The Russian government has even managed to close some of the major torrent sites, and has published an anti-piracy guide to help retailers avoid getting burned by illegal distributors. It might sound like a tough regime, but the Russian government knows that it can't allow crime to dominate development, and that applies to gaming as much as anywhere else.

As more people made use of the 1C shops, so the Russian publishers were able to raise their prices back towards their Western equivalents. This has enabled the cost of games to rise, and therefore make gaming in Russia a profitable business at last. While a pirated game cost $1.75 in 2000, today games are about $20, and you'll probably have to get them from a 1C shop. It might only have been reveling in capitalism for the last 20 years, but the former Soviet Union isn't far behind the rest of us these days. Naturally, all this is making the 1C bosses very wealthy, but the money is also finding its way into the vibrant creative industry that we saw on show at the Cosmos Hotel.

KRI was a sign of a very healthy industry. Russia may be far from taking the US crown as videogame development kings, but the rate at which its sophistication and ambition is increasing blows everyone else out of the DX10 water. Watch out, world: the Russians are coming for your games industry.

WE NEED THE RUSSIANS, AND THEY NEED US

THE ENDLESS BEAR

In the spirit of the times, let us raise a toast (with that crisp vodka I brought back from Moscow) to the spirit of co-operation. The PC gaming industry both here in the US and around the world needs Russia. And the Russians need us. PC gaming accounts for 70% of all electronic gaming in the former Soviet bloc, with almost 30% of sales in the greater Moscow area. The consoles are only going to make inroads into that very slowly, as the idea that a PC is also a useful tool for education and internet use is strong in Russia. They have no console culture, and don't see much need for it. Consequently, it's a hotbed for new PC gaming development talent. Here, more than anywhere else in the world, young PC gamers are learning that a job in game development is a viable career.

/// *PC Gamer* Russia employs a very pretty girl. She wasn't impressed by Jim. ///

What's more, it seems that Russia's developers are beginning to realize just how easily they can compete with the expensive Western development teams. Here, and in the rest of the educated world, is where the future of PC gaming is being struck. If anyone makes a worthy spiritual successor to our past-generation classics, such as *Deus Ex* or *System Shock*, then it seems likely that it will come out of Russia. No one in the West would even dare pitch such a game as *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, and yet it seemed like the most natural thing in the world for the GSC team, and it went on to sell 1.6 million at retail. Not bad for a bunch of guys working out of a former weapons factory.

Hopefully, however, the Russian invasion won't be a one-sided campaign, but instead a collaboration. Already we're seeing signs that experienced, talented Western developers are moving in on the lower-cost Eastern teams and setting up operations. *Crimecraft*, the recently announced crime MMO, will be powered by the American *Unreal* engine, the studio managed by an LA-based production core, and the game itself built by a hardworking Ukrainian team. These kinds of distributed efforts are springing up all over the world, and that's a trend that is only going to continue. The transit of talent and experience will eventually run in both directions, and the industry of game development will become truly global. The bear, I'd like to think, is going to lead us to a better place.

/// The show floor at KRI bustled with devs, PRs, and tech-pimping salesmen. ///

DAN STAPLETON
REVIEWS EDITOR

REVIEWS

SLEEP IS FOR THE WEAK

It's a dangerous time to be a gamer right now. Millions of people are staying up all night playing *World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King*, and are reduced to a zombie-like state from sleep deprivation. Meanwhile, millions more are staying up all night playing *Left 4 Dead*, making them trigger-happy and paranoid. When these two groups meet during the day at work, it's only a matter of time before a team of *L4D* players mistakes a *WoW* clan for a zombie horde and starts rifle-butting their coworkers on the way to barricading themselves in the office supply closet.

/// In a sleep-deprived state, I could see how this guy could easily be mistaken for a *WoW* player. ///

Games like *L4D* and *WoW* demonstrate PC gaming at its finest, and that quality is translating to massive sales. Fun fact of the month: *World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King* is now the fastest-selling PC game of all time, having moved 2.8 million units in the first 24 hours alone. That works out to 32 copies *per second*. In the time it took you to read this short column, Blizzard sold about 1,944 copies of *WotLK*. While you were catching the three hours of sleep between last night's marathon session of *WoW* and showing up entirely useless at work, Blizzard sold 350,000 copies. That's a lot of wrath.

These astonishing numbers mean that *WotLK* probably sold more copies in a single hour (116,666) than *Richard Garriot's Tabula Rasa* sold in its entire, tragically short lifespan, set to end on February 28. (Check this month's Alternate Lives column on page 88 for Desslock's take on Richard Garriot's gaming legacy.) That's got to sting a bit.

ARE YOU A MENTALIST?

HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO FIND OUT IF YOU'VE GOT WHAT IT TAKES TO JOIN THE MASTERS OF FORTUNE-TELLING!

Every once in a very long while comes a prodigy who can see into the future as clearly as the rest of us see our own reflections in the mirror. Are you that person? Do you have the gift of scry? Our Top Games of 2009 feature story presents the perfect opportunity to test yourself.

Will *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty* will be better than *Dragon Age: Origins*? Will *F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin* out-score *Deus Ex 3*? The answers lie only in the future. So turn down the lights, light a few candles, and stare into a glassy, reflective surface (maybe a filled bathtub, or that 42-inch HDTV if it's turned off). Once the numbers reveal themselves to you, fill out the score card below with your predictions for the scores *PC Gamer* will give to each of the games in our Top Games of 2009 feature (on a percentage scale from one to 100).

Then tear out this page and bury it in your backyard. On January 1, 2010, dig it up and compare to your back issues of *PC Gamer* to see how you did.

If you got within five percent of all nine scores, you may consider yourself a seer on par with the greats, including the Master Mentalist Newmann himself.

2009 PREDICTIONS

Game Title	% Score
Diablo III	
StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty	
Dragon Age: Origins	

Game Title	% Score
Star Trek Online	
F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin	
Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War II	

Game Title	% Score
The Sims 3	
Deus Ex 3	
Empire: Total War	

HOW WE RATE THE GAMES

90% EDITORS' CHOICE
100%-90%
It's not easy to get here, and games in this range come with our unqualified recommendation.

80% EXCELLENT
89%-80%
These are excellent games. They're well worth buying, and each one is likely a great example of its genre.

70% GOOD
79%-70%
These are pretty good games that we'd recommend to fans of the particular genre, but better options exist.

60% ABOVE AVERAGE
69%-60%
Reasonable, above-average games. They might be worth buying, but they probably have a few significant flaws.

50% MERELY OKAY
59%-50%
Very ordinary games. They're not completely worthless, but you can definitely find numerous better choices.

40% TOLERABLE
49%-40%
Poor quality. Only a few slightly redeeming features keep these games from the abyss of the next category.

30% DON'T BOTHER
39%-0%
Just terrible. These games are the electronic equivalent of being smothered by a thousand furious furballs.

/// Arcane missiles are about as effective as a handful of glitter against the dragon Cyanigosa when she gets that "I'm gona eat you" look in her eye. ///

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: WRATH OF THE LICH KING

LFG [FIGHT WITH ARTHAS IN NORTHREND] LEVEL 70+ ONLY!

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

It is specifically those who are trying to get out of *World of Warcraft* in order to lead some sort of meaningful real-world life that Blizzard has targeted with the launch of the second expansion, *Wrath of the Lich King*. It's a new continent, Northrend, accessible only to those who have reached the top of *WoW*'s previous level 70 cap (and thus requires *The Burning Crusade* expansion to play), and the new class, the Death Knight, adds complexity to entice players who've outgrown relatively simple classes.

Quests are deeper, too. I've just finished an intriguing one that involves giving orders to a tribe of plague-infested ogres via—inevitably—a staff of greater mind control. My goal was to kill enough enemy trolls (60) that three of their leaders were drawn into combat, at which point an airborne ally swooped down and captured them. These poor suckers appear later in the story to play a vital role after something unspeakable happens to them, but I won't give too much away.

It took some time and experimentation to figure out how to achieve this. A one-on-one fight between the ogre and a troll takes a few minutes to resolve, and if you join in to help, you'll lose control of your ally. To speed things up you can set the infection that lives in the big ogre's rotten stomach to achieve critical mass and meltdown, and the carrier will explode with enough force to kill everything within a fairly large blast radius. In four years of playing *WoW*—an achievement for which I've just received a very cute but disappointingly pretend baby bear from the in-game mail—I've never created a character that uses combat pets, so this was a new experience for me. For about 10 frustrating minutes I repeatedly grabbed an explodable ogre, ran to the troll camp, and ran around trying to grab mobs and bring them back to him, because when he enters combat he stands still. I actually died a couple of times doing this.

NORTHREND IS ACCESSIBLE ONLY IF YOU'VE REACHED THE TOP END OF *WOW*'S PREVIOUS LEVEL 70 CAP (AND THUS REQUIRES *THE BURNING CRUSADE* TO PLAY).

FINALLY, REALIZATION DAWNED: although the ogre is rooted when he fights, by commanding him to attack a distant enemy he'll run through the massed ranks of trolldom, ignoring other assailants long enough to attract the attention of 10 or 15 of them before I detonate him, wiping them all out in one fell swoop.

Sixty trolls met their deaths swiftly this way, and tedium was replaced by the warm knowledge that a creative challenge was risen to, and that I didn't have to collect ears from the corpses left behind—a quest type which, while still common, is no longer overbearingly predominant. It's clear that Blizzard is trying to move away from this trend—to the point, that at times, *WoTLK* runs the risk of trying too hard to be funny about avoiding it. Around level 72, I had four different packs of dynamite in my sack for four different destroy-don't-collect quests.

/// New lighting effects make the old engine look great with spectacular spells. ///

This is balanced out by a huge amount of attention lavished on the story that binds your adventure. The troll episode, as diverting as it is, is one of the last chapters in a tale that begins innocuously when you lend a hand to a guy in a cage, then turns into a sprawling chain involving deception, dungeons, betrayal, and—eventually—a meeting with the Lich King himself.

Anyone who's played *WoW* long enough to see Northrend will be familiar with the way self-aware slapstick is combined with serious in-game lore. Sometimes it's played for laughs—like the return of hapless archaeologist Harrison Jones, thought to be dead in Zul'aman, complete with John Williams–inspired quest title "Da-da-dum-dah." Mostly, though, the entertainment is attached to something more heavyweight: if at some point in the final area, Icecrown, I'm challenged to kill a dragon with a pig's bladder on a stick, I'll

/// Blizzard's art designers never fail to impress. We want some of what they're on. ///

:: VITALS :: **GENRE:** ROLE-PLAYING GAME **DEVELOPER:** BLIZZARD **PUBLISHER:** BLIZZARD **REQUIRED:** P4 1.3GHZ, 512MB RAM, 32MB GEFORCE 2/RADEON7200 VIDEOCARD, 13GB HD SPACE, WORLD OF WARCRAFT, THE BURNING CRUSADE, INTERNET CONNECTION **RECOMMENDED:** DUAL CORE CPU, 1GB RAM, 128MB GEFORCE 7800 GT/ RADEON X1800 **MAX PLAYERS:** MMO **ESRB:** T

THESE PHASE EVENTS ARE TRULY EPIC. IT'S BLIZZARD'S WRITERS WORKING AT THEIR BEST, UNAFRAID TO MAKE DRAMATIC CHANGES TO THE CORE OF *WOW* LORE.

probably feel I'm doing it heroically.

These long quest chains are surprisingly common, and serve to build pace. From the moment you set foot in Northrend, you're part of something bigger. Fighting on the front lines feels more effective and frantic than it did in the battle against the Burning Legion in *TBC*, and it helps connect the inevitable grinding areas (like Grizzly Hills) to the main event. I have fond memories from there in ways I don't from, say, the interminably dull Zangamarsh in *TBC*.

BUT BLIZZARD'S storytelling is front and center more than ever before, thanks to something it terms "phase technology." With it, two people can be in the same region at the same time and see two totally different things. It first appears in the Death Knight starting area. Initially, when you create one of the new hero characters, you're a servant of the Lich King in the Scourge vanguard invading Eastern Plaguelands. After one of the best quest sequences to date—in which you learn to wield the new powers of this tanking/DPS class hybrid—an event happens and the world as you see it changes completely. Ebon Hold is no longer a bleak fortress of torture spewing death and destruction on the citizenry below, it's a bleak fortress of torture populated by the acceptable faces of Death Knightery, who are welcomed with open arms by the citizenry below (sort of). At other points, even the main faction capitals will be "phased" in new story loops. Finally, your actions in *WoW* are no longer meaningless; the universe can and will be different after your actions without breaking the game for players of a lower level. That's a pretty big step forward.

For the most part, of course, it isn't widely used. Phasing must be a resource-intensive part of the game engine, and it also means you can't interact normally with players outside of your phase or go back and do a quest again to help out a friend. When it does make an appearance, you'll know about it. The phase events—and I'm trying not to give anything away—are truly epic. It's Blizzard's writers working at their best, unafraid to make dramatic changes to the core lore. As entertaining as a lot of the pastiches in *WoTLK* are, it's the tragedies that befall well-known NPCs which make for a much stronger emotional involvement this time round.

The class changes that were rolled out in patches leading up to the launch of *WoTLK* were specifically aimed at shaking endgamers out of their one-button spam habits. It could have been a *Planetside* or *Star Wars: Galaxies* moment

THE WHEELS OF WARCRAFT

AND THE WINGS, BIKES, AND TANK TRACKS, TOO

/// Ice blocks your flying mount from take off until you visit the Cold Weather Flight Master at level 77. You're not grounded, though: this jet-propelled golem is one of the first vehicles you encounter. ///

/// The new vehicle interface is basically an enlarged pet command bar, but it does mean you can ride a dragon into battle. ///

/// Every guild should have an engineer capable of making these. The new bike mount may not carry two vendors everywhere you go like the woolly mammoth, but it's a bike, man. ///

/// Drak'Tharon Keep is home to undead trolls, their Scourge masters, and (for some reason) a T-Rex. ///

/// Avoid the grind: you can now earn more XP than ever in instances. ///

for *WoW*, when the developers fundamentally broke things and confused the players, but instead it's been invigorating and sparked pages of convoluted new theory-crafting discussion on the ultra-hardcore forums like ElitistJerks.com.

Now, not only is it harder to beat the game with a simple spell rotation, but most of the boss fights in Northrend also require far more awareness than ever before. A particular favorite is Herald Volazj, in spidery Ahn'kahet. He drives the group insane, dividing your group and forcing you to fight nightmare versions of your party members by yourself before you can phase back to the group to help take the evil mystic down.

Come the endgame, there's a lot more stuff to do that won't require the kind of insane dedication that the previous 25-or-more-man content did. Distraught that just two percent of *WoW*'s population saw the end of Black Temple, the final dungeon in *TBC*, let alone its more difficult cousin (introduced in a later patch), the Sunwell Plateau, Blizzard has built on the popularity of accessible instances like heroic dungeons and Karazhan by making every endgame raid available as a 10 or 25 man affair, and they've thrown in more varied types of badge and rep loot to grind for, too. The aim is to turn raiding into a hobby, rather than a second job.

There's also acknowledgement that most long-term players will level more than one character to 80. Northrend has two distinct entry points, so it's entirely possible to get to reach 73 on a second character without seeing any of the same content twice.

This is Blizzard playing to the crowd, and rightly so; after four years, if you haven't played, never warmed to, or simply lost the love for *WoW*, *Wrath of the Lich King* isn't going to change that. The changes are big, but it's still the same game underneath.

EVEN EXPERIENCED PLAYERS who appreciate the higher drop rates on wolf-organ-gathering quests will have a few complaints. As with *TBC*, the big one is with gear rewards in the early levels. With the previous expansion, players who'd spent months building epic armor sets were devastated to find them of no worth at all in Outland, where green drops from the first area out-statted anything previously seen. This time round it's the opposite problem—at level 77 there's still little to replace early endgame stuff of tier four or above, and no real challenge in any of the pre–level 80 dungeons

/// "So, you're the Lich King, huh? Somehow, I expected you to be taller." ///

IT'S THE FACT THAT DESPITE ITS TECHNICAL LIMITATIONS, *WOW* IS STILL THE BEST-LOOKING ONLINE WORLD OUT THERE, AND THE MOST CAPABLE OF THROWING UP SURPRISES.

for anyone who's raided Gruul. Talk about an over-reaction on Blizzard's part.

What *Lich King* shows, though, is why Blizzard is still the best at what it does. It's not about money or resources: Northrend doesn't feel bigger or more structurally demanding than *Conan*'s Hyboria or *Warhammer*'s Empire. The visual technology isn't anything fancy, either—even after the latest patch, which brought in real-time shadowing and some basic shader effects, Blizzard's graphics are schoolboy stuff compared to Mythic or Funcom's technical tours des force.

It's the fact that despite its technical limitations, *WoW* is still the best-looking online world out there, and the most capable of throwing up surprises, that makes *Lich King* great. Leaping from snow-capped peaks to tropical forests; watching the local fauna fight among itself and not standing around waiting to be attacked; discovering ghosts of the past acting out scenes from Arthas' fall to an empty auditorium. These are what re-establish *WoW* as a universe that rewards exploring as much as it does gathering XP or gear.

Will everyone be enamored with small innovations like the questing structure? Definitely not. Once a grind, always a grind for those who have their eyes set firmly on the endgame. A nearby warlock volunteered his feelings about the troll slaying task. "F***ing tedious s**t quest," he tells me. As my nonplussed warlock accomplice wanders off through the dramatically savaged land of Zul'drak, I can't help but feel he's missed the opportunity to celebrate the pastime in which he's invested so much. Did so much of *WoW* require nothing more than the ability to sit still for hours on end that people don't appreciate when Blizzard tries to make things more engaging? Do they actively dislike being challenged to come up with a solution that QuestHelper can't drip-feed to them?

Hopefully, that's just a minority. The rest of us, those who still take joy in new approaches to gaming, can banish the fear that we're just dragging our pitiful husks back to a well-worn routine because that's what "The Game" demands. *Lich King*'s improvements prove that *WoW* still deserves our devotion.

/// ADAM OXFORD ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Innovative new quests; outstanding writing; "phasing" technology.

LOWS// Still a grind underneath it all; not enough gear upgrades before level 80; no new content under level 70.

BOTTOM LINE// Blizzard satisfies the legions of *WoW* faithful with another dose of outstanding content, but gives new players no new reasons to join up.

0% BETTER >> 100% **93%**

++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

/// The only time you'll have to do your own dirty work is when your teammates decide to stare at a wall. ///

SAS: SECURE TOMORROW

:: SO SECURE, YOU DON'T EVEN NEED TO DO ANYTHING

For those not familiar with the SAS, it's the Brits' equivalent of the U.S. Marine Corps. Or, if you believe *SAS: Secure Tomorrow*'s interpretation, it's an army of unkillable yet dim-witted super-soldiers that mow down international terrorists by the dozen.

You personally are a counter-terrorist of flesh and blood, but having a team of unstoppable Terminators makes that largely irrelevant. As soon as you take the first step into a room, your two partners will charge in, easily absorbing their weight in lead, and clumsily shoot everything that moves. You'd be able to run through the entire game without firing a shot if your partners weren't prone to getting caught on level geometry or obliviously running right through an enemy camp. Unintentional as they may be, these bugs are the only "features" that make *SAS* even remotely challenging.

/// Brusque multiplay lacks the two best features: flash bangs and the stacking system. ///

YOUR SQUAD UTILIZES A well-worn but still-enjoyable mechanic of stacking up on a door and throwing in a flashbang, or rather a flash-slow-down-time-bang that lets you shred those freedom-haters in slow-mo. The shotgun and sniper rifle provide worthwhile alternatives to the standard-issue assault rifle; pistols, submachine guns, and dropped enemy weapons are unnecessary. The same drab office facility environments are repeated across most missions, and even the snowy mountain setting quickly grows tiresome as paths are arbitrarily blocked to force you along a tightly linear route.

The SAS's god-like force feels wasted on the lackluster antagonists in the game, whose entire diabolical scheme is foiled in a few measly hours of gameplay. Enemies knock over objects for cover, but otherwise, the AI is rudimentary. This combination of powerful allies and weak foes makes the player feel completely superfluous, so why not play a game that needs us instead? /// JOSH AUGUSTINE///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **37%**

++ DON'T BOTHER ++

:: VITALS :: **GENRE:** FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER **DEVELOPER:** CITY INTERACTIVE **PUBLISHER:** CITY INTERACTIVE **REQUIRED:** P4 2GHZ, 512MB RAM, 128MB GEFORCE 5700/RADEON 9700 GRAPHICS CARD, 3GB HD SPACE **RECOMMENDED:** P4 2.4GHZ, 1GB RAM, GEFORCE 7800GT/RADEON X800 **MAX PLAYERS:** 16 **ESRB RATING:** M

/// Watch out! It's the... um...Watcher. ///

THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: MINES OF MORIA

MIDDLE-EARTH ADDS NEW TREASURES TO ITS DEPTHS—THE MORIA THE MERRIER!

Launching an MMO expansion pack in the same month that Blizzard launches *World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King* seems like madness, but *The Lord of the Rings Online* has a vast enough user base, well-defined and even innovative MMO mechanics, and the world's best-known fantasy universe to help it get the attention it deserves. *The Mines of Moria* picks up at the end of Volume One of *LoTRO*. We've just said goodbye to the Fellowship as they depart Rivendell on their fateful journey to Mordor to throw the one ring into the fires of Mount Doom, which will take them through Moria. Your avatar won't see the inside of Moria until level 50, though, and that's a long road, especially if you want to savor the sights and sounds of Middle-earth—and trust me, you'll want to. The expansion also includes a vast new external region called Eregion that leads up to the walls of Moria, packed with plenty of quests and foes to keep you occupied before you venture into the dark caverns. As you kick off Volume Two of the epic storyline proper, the journey into Moria itself, you'll encounter the Watcher in the Water, the foul tentacled beast in the lake near the Hollin's Gate entrance to Moria.

It's the encounter with the Watcher that introduces you to the new Legendary Items system. Frodo's got Sting, Gandalf has Glamdring, and now I've got Stabatha, the legendary dagger. These are unique and potentially powerful items, starting out fairly ordinary, but gaining experience and leveling up just as you do. It seems complicated at first, but looking at the Legendary Items panel I was soon able to customize my dagger into a weapon I was proud of. Each item is class-specific and highly customizable, leveling and adjusting each (or breaking them down into components to enhance other weapons) as you go along.

/// Anything unattractive must die. ///

:: VITALS :: **GENRE:** ROLE-PLAYING GAME **DEVELOPER:** TURBINE **PUBLISHER:** TURBINE **REQUIRED:** P4 1.8GHZ, 512MB RAM, 64MB GEFORCE 3/RADEON 8500 VIDEOCARD, 9GB HD SPACE, LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE, INTERNET CONNECTION **RECOMMENDED:** P4 2.8GHZ, 1GB RAM, GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850, BROADBAND INTERNET **MAX PLAYERS:** MMO **ESRB:** T

LEGENDARY ITEMS

THE QUEST LINE TO ENTER MORIA INTRODUCES YOU TO THE POWERFUL NEW CUSTOM ITEMS

01 Get your weapon/item identified by a Forge Master to reveal the number of Legacies (upgradable abilities) initially available. Return to him every 10 levels to reforge your item.

02 Level your item by gaining XP in combat, adding Legend Points that can be spent on upgrading Legacies. You can level multiple (up to six) Legendary items simultaneously.

03 Slot up to three types of Relics (settings, gems and runes) at any one time to gain special set bonuses. You can swap out your relics each time you reforge your Legendary Item.

> FRODO'S GOT STING, GANDALF HAS GLAMDRING, AND I'VE GOT STABATHA, A UNIQUE AND POWERFUL LEGENDARY DAGGER.

ONCE YOU FINALLY GET into Moria you're in for a real treat, because the large interior halls, mines, and long dark corridors look exactly as Tolkien described, rendered in *LoTRO*'s attractive engine. There's also plenty to keep you occupied as you work your way through its myriad of rooms and areas with around 600 new quests and 300 new deeds and accomplishments, plus some great new raid options. The 12-player raid to battle the Watcher in the Water is likely to become a favorite over the coming months, but it's the single-player storyline quests in the dark places of Moria that will keep you gripped. Turbine has come up with inventive ways for you to experience key parts of *LoTR* that you wouldn't normally be involved with, such as a time-travelling story arc that lets you experience the original uncovering of the Balrog through the eyes of one of Dwalin's minions. There are countless wonderful moments to be experienced on your own personal journey through the game, and each is respectful to the source material.

It's too early to say how the two new classes fit with the rest in terms of what they might bring to fellowship grouping or to larger, longer raiding teams. The Warden, a medium tanking class with standard ranged attacks via javelins and stronger melee abilities when you're fighting toe-to-toe seems like a balanced soloing class. He has a new attack system called Gambit that allows you to use a main hand weapon, shield, and taunt in set combinations to deliver either impressive damaging blows or defense and morale healing opportunities. The Rune-keeper, a lightly armored and armed class with runic abilities to either attack or heal, will likely be a slow burner for leveling by those already experienced in managing group aggro while soloing. As you deal damage or heal yourself and allies, you'll be temporarily specializing in that path using the Attunement Meter, another new feature introduced with this class. Building up a series of attacks or heals it allows you to access more powerful skills in that line.

Warg Riders are a vicious new foe, with the claws and teeth of the Warg up close and the ranged attack of the Goblin rider.

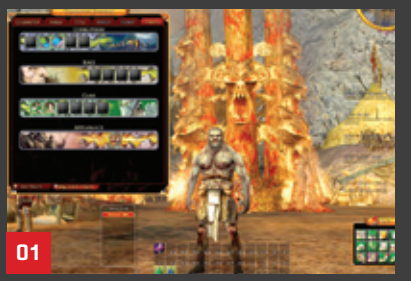
A quick peek in one of the *PC Gamer* character inventory bags shows three more Legendary Weapons lined up for our Warden.

The combat text window is an optional display, but most RPG purists like to see the amount of damage and magnitude of critical attacks.

The Warden vainly blocks with his shield, an automatic process calculated from factors such as the level difference between the opponents.

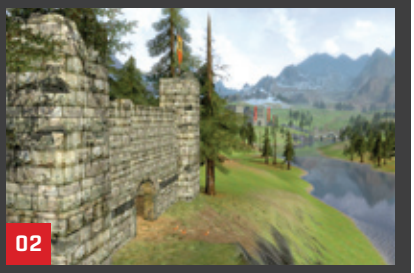
EVEN MORE ETTENMOORS

A FEW OF THE CHANGES TO MONSTER PLAY, LOTRO'S PLAYER-VERSUS-PLAYER MODE



01

Creatures (Creeps) automatically start at level 60, and get an additional class trait slot (now six). It'll be a while before we see the free peoples (Freeps) controlling Ettens.



02

To avoid an imbalance of power, the least-populated side gains a bonus to defense. You can also buff your side by controlling towers and keeps, and capturing the opponent's flag.

03

The zone's dungeon, The Delving, is accessed by controlling two of the available five outposts, so both sides could be in at once.

04

Each side now controls an artifact, secure behind this sturdy gate. If the Freeps get both of these, the whole of Eriador gains a three percent bonus to XP.

/// The beautiful new zones provide some excellent backdrops to pose in front of. ///

I've always found the crafting system to be a worthwhile and satisfying pastime right from day one, but thanks to Moria's new enhancements it's even more rewarding. Once you reach Expert level in your chosen profession, you can join a Crafting Guild that will give you access to exclusive recipes. A Supreme tier of mastery is waiting to be achieved, the items produced being appropriate for those above level 50. If you've improved your reputation with your Crafting Guild far enough, you'll even be able to produce special class-specific items, Legendary weapons, and items that can boost the speed of leveling that new Legendary item.

TURBINE HAS DONE AN amazing job in expanding the game while being mindful about not unbalancing the core Angmar experience, or leaving vast swathes of Middle-earth deserted as people migrate to the new areas. There's always a reason to head back to the original areas to complete deeds, build up traits, access key crafting halls, and trade on the Auction House. There's fundamentally always something to do, and it isn't just about fighting evil.

The biggest knock against *MoM* is its rocky launch—the first week of release saw seen an unwelcome and, for this game, unusual abundance of bugs. Server stability has been a little questionable with unceremonious dumps to Windows, characters getting stuck in doors and finger-tapping waits while the game attempts to improve your connection when you reconnect. These are not uncommon issues for MMOs to experience during the release of a major update, and certainly from the previous levels of bulletproof reliability prior to *Moria*, Turbine will probably stamp out these issues promptly.

/// Tolkien must've hit the "pipe weed" hard when he came up with The Ostrich of Osgiliath. ///

Finally, for all the well-written and entertaining quests, it still employs the traditional grind fare of kill X number of things and recover X number of body parts that's a seemingly inescapable part of MMO gaming—but a simple expansion can hardly be expected to cure that ill. Even so, *LoTRO* fans won't even consider abandoning the Fellowship to journey ahead into Moria without them.

/// TREVOR WITT ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Two new regions; Legendary items; loyal to the source material; new content for players of all levels.

LOWS// Buggy at launch; still a bit of a grind.

BOTTOM LINE// Fans of *The Lord of the Rings* will be pulled even deeper into the lore by the level of detail that Turbine has achieved, and the depth of the new content.

0% BETTER >> 100% **86%**

++ EXCELLENT ++

/// Go ahead and jump. With Elika there to fling you to safety, you're free to explore, experiment, and goof off. ///

PRINCE OF PERSIA

ALL DRESSED UP WITH NO PALACE TO GO

Seeing that a coat of dark emo eyeliner failed to cover up the flaws of 2005's *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones*, Ubisoft Montreal has rebooted the series, *Batman Begins*-style, in an attempt to recapture the simple, graceful, imaginative spirit of the original Jordan Mechner games. In that, this new *Prince of Persia* is wildly successful: the world is breathtaking, the Prince's acrobatics are artfully choreographed, and innovation is coming out its ears. All it really lacks is a compelling reason for us to care.

In a daring departure from the last two games, the Prince has been recast as a wisecracking grifter with an American accent and a male stripper's body. He stumbles upon a princess named Elika who tells him that her father inadvertently set free an evil god named Ahriman that subsequently ran around polluting her father's realms. She's hot enough that the Prince decides to help her to use her magical powers to heal her father's realms of the inky, lethal "corruption" Ahriman has left behind.

The new visual style is another risky move for the series. Against a backdrop of traditionally rendered three-dimensional environments with towering spires, floating airships, and exposed clockwork mechanisms (sort of Jules Verne by way of *American McGee's Alice*), all of the characters and much of the flora and fauna are drawn in what Ubi calls an "illustrative" style that is absolutely dazzling and bristling with energy and life.

BUT THE MOST ADVENTUROUS

gambit of all is that the Prince can no longer die. If he stumbles or steps into a pile of corruption, Elika swoops down like Peter Pan, grabs the Prince's arm, and deposits him back at the closest safe plateau. Yes, this makes the game very easy, so you're never afraid that you'll make a mistake and have to reload your game. Fans who crave some of that old-school *PoP* tough love are free to hit Ctrl-Alt-Del every time the Prince stumbles, but the rest of us will appreciate what Ubi Monty has done here, which is to create a completely immersive experience that doesn't punish experimentation with loading screens. In fact, this clever twist actually turns *PoP* into something more akin to a rhythm game like *Guitar Hero* than an action game, in which the challenge is to string along longer and longer chains of leaps, dodges, and acrobatics until you flub a step and Elika has to save your butt.

/// The Prince and Elika must avoid the gooey black corruption until each realm is "healed." ///

NEITHER ELIKA'S CHARACTER

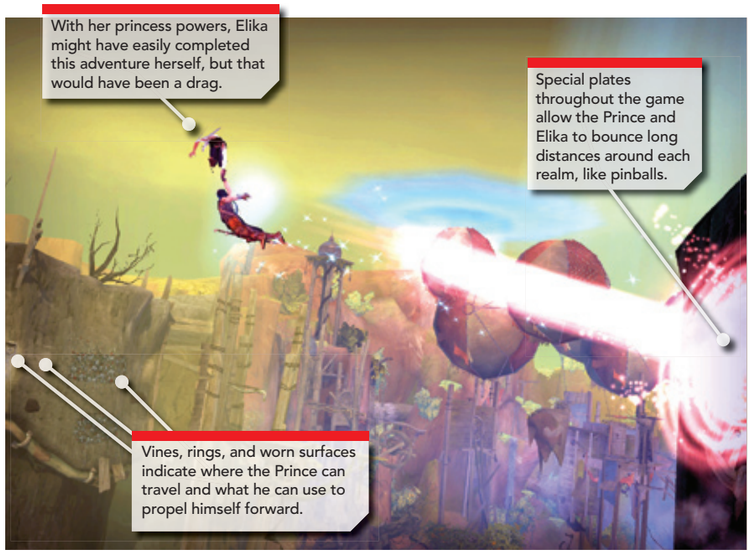
nor her assistance is ever annoying—and if you have ever played alongside an NPC before for any length of time, you know what an achievement this is. If the pair is standing on a beam, and the Prince needs to be on the other side of her, you simply run in her direction, they grab each other's arms, and do a do-si-do as he swings around to the other side. If they're hanging from said beam, she'll drop and he'll swing her over to the other side of him in a maneuver that's beautiful and flawlessly executed every time.

All this wonderful stuff can't completely make up for the fact that the game is composed almost entirely of garbage collecting. You cannot complete a level until you have "healed" an environment by guiding Elika to a special plateau and humping a single key, and *then* you must collect a certain number of "light seeds" in order to unlock powers that will open up further levels. You must collect literally hundreds of them, spread out over vast swaths of land, and in doing so you'll have to traverse the same areas at least twice, and often three or four times each.

In the meantime, you'll fight intensely repetitive battles pitting the Prince and Elika against a single foe in small arenas throughout the game. The combat is gorgeous to watch, and uncoordinated button-mashing only hamstrings your ability to pull off combos, but you face a limited variety of foes and endlessly recycled mini-bosses who appear again and again throughout the game.

It's after these battles that Elika drip-feeds you portions of the story that took place before the Prince's arrival, and though it sounds like a pretty good story, it just reminds us that we got there after all the cool stuff went down. It's not the lack of death that drains the game of its urgency and suspense; it's the lack of *purpose* in each level, other than to show off the lovely design of virtual monkey bars topped off with some fireworks at the end. Ubi has in place everything it needs to launch a brilliant new series of games. It just needs to put the Prince *in* the story next time, instead of after it.

/// LOGAN DECKER ///



/// The Prince is a master of the art of Squirrel-style martial arts. ///

/// "*You again?*" Combat has been improved, but you'll face the same foes over and over. ///

:: VITALS :: **GENRE:** ACTION **DEVELOPER:** UBISOFT MONTREAL **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT **REQUIRED:** 2.6GHZ CPU, 1GB RAM (2GB FOR VISTA), 256MB GEFORCE 6800/RADEON X1600 VIDEOCARD, 8GB HD SPACE **RECOMMENDED:** 3.2GHZ CORE 2 DUO, 2GB RAM, GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 1 **ESRB:** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Intoxicatingly beautiful. No tedious save-and-reload. Likeable, funny characters.

LOWS// Labor-camp level design. Lame story presentation. Intensely repetitive combat.

BOTTOM LINE// Despite its disappointments, *Prince of Persia* is still a lavishly enjoyable game and a promising refresh of the series.

0% BETTER >> 100% **78%**

++ GOOD ++

/// Bring an umbrella when visiting New York; you do *not* want to get crapped on by a Gryhpon. ///

LEGENDARY

A SERIES OF LESSONS IN HOW NOT TO MAKE AN FPS

Were I a stuffy historical type, I might point out that Pandora's Box wasn't a box at all, but rather a jar. Either way, the mislabeled box in *Legendary* contains not all the evils of the world, but generic monsters and one awesome rubble-golem the size of a block of apartment buildings.

Legendary is a first-person shooter that plays mix-and-match with both its fictions and its quality. The first five minutes deliver the kind of explosive lunacy that only videogames are capable of, and then the game immediately pitches headfirst down a sewer of awfulness and drowns in its own detritus.

/// Wait, does fire kill werewolves? No? Do they make *silver* fire? ///

Take just one room in *Legendary*'s many arenas: It's an easy jumping puzzle—bad enough, you might say. But then it adds in a constantly respawning baddie that must be beheaded to finish him off—but the head regularly clips through the scenery, making it impossible to reach. Wait, it gets better: if you die, it's back to the badly placed checkpoint, usually with an unskippable cutscene attached. Ugh.

***LEGENDARY* IS FILLED WITH** this type of basic annoyance. The magic energy system of health means that enemies take away your hitpoints and immediately give them back again, sucking the drama out of any encounter. Stupidly, battles with non-magical creatures give no option for health boost and as such prove to be instant spikes in difficulty. Then there's the door-hacking. You hold E for five seconds…10? More? How long is this going to take? Oh, it's finally opened…I have to do it again right away? Three times? Oh god.

It's not that it's broken or malfunctional in any major way: the game's entirely playable and there are very few bugs. The Unreal Engine also performs admirably in delivering everything that *Legendary* wants to show us in a handsome way. It just seems as if the person in charge of figuring out what fun is has just had the concept explained to him on the bus on the way to work, but has never experienced fun for himself. Or perhaps Spark just hasn't bothered to study the tricks and nuances of the past decade of videogames to discover what works and what we *hate*.

/// The sight of a giant rubble golem strolling down the street makes you wish this were a better game. ///

It's not all bad: some of the scripted scenes of destruction are wonderful. I just wish the entire game had been delivered with such hysterical verve.

/// JIM ROSSIGNOL ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Impressive scripted scenes of destruction; cool giant rubble golem; passable graphics.

LOWS// Irritating level design; spiking difficulty; checkpoint save system; backward gameplay.

BOTTOM LINE// *Legendary* fails to learn from any of the shooters that came before it, and as a result repeats nearly every mistake in the book.

0% BETTER >> 100% **40%**

++ TOLERABLE ++

:: VITALS :: **GENRE:** FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER **DEVELOPER:** SPARK **PUBLISHER:** SOUTHPEAK **REQUIREMENTS:** P4 2.4GHZ, 1GB RAM, GEFORCE 7600GT/RADEON X1600, 9.5GB HD SPACE **RECOMMENDED:** DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 3850 **MAX PLAYERS:** 16 **ESRB:** M

/// In reality, there's no way this jump ends well. In *Pure*, there's no way it ends badly. ///

PURE

LIKE INHALING A MIX OF DIRT, AIR, AND ADRENALINE

If you've never jumped off an ATV while 100 feet in the air and run in place next to it before climbing back on (still in mid-air, mind you), you're missing out on a serious rush.

As a professional ATV racer, you perform a mix of realistic and gravity-defying tricks at blistering speeds across a variety of beautifully rendered exotic landscapes. *Pure*'s more fantastical aspects, such as the occasional ineffectual run-in with a tree that doesn't interrupt your rider's acrobatics, may offend physics purists but it sacrifices that realism to achieve an adrenaline-pumping pace that avoids penalizing experimentation with the game's engaging trick combo system.

/// Your racer avatar loves to be upgraded. ///

/// Get out of the pack asap because the other riders will bump you off course. ///

The World Tour campaign lets you compete through 10 stages, each consisting of four to seven events, in Race, Sprint, or Freestyle modes. Freestyle and Race play essentially the same, whether you chain together tricks for points or speed boosts, but tiny courses with no big jumps limit my enthusiasm for Sprints. Like a true feel-good game, *Pure* rewards you with new ATVs, racer avatars, or upgrade parts after almost every event, even if you don't take first.

***PURE*'S EXTREMELY FORGIVING** learning curve makes it friendly to even the most novice racers, but will fail to challenge experienced drivers. Overcoming the controls—a misguided attempt to mimic dual joysticks on a keyboard—is the real obstacle to success. A gamepad is strongly recommended.

There's some wasted potential in multiplayer, which is an uninspired replica of the single player modes without rewards, and both single- and multiplayer suffer from long load screens. But these hiccups won't do more than stall your enjoyment. *Pure* is exciting fun that long-time racing fans and those looking to get their feet wet in the genre can enjoy.

/// JOSH AUGUSTINE///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **82%**

++ EXCELLENT ++

:: VITALS :: **GENRE:** RACING **DEVELOPER:** BLACKROCK STUDIO **PUBLISHER:** DISNEY INTERACTIVE **REQUIRED:** P4 2.0GHZ, 1GB RAM, 128MB GEFORCE 6600/RADEON X1300 VIDEOCARD, 5.5GB HD SPACE **RECOMMENDED:** DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 16 **ESRB RATING:** M

/// The speed and agility of motorcycles make them incredibly tricky targets to hit, but they offer less protection than a four-wheeled ride. ///

GRAND THEFT AUTO IV

DRM ALERT SEE VITALS

OUR REVIEW, PART TWO: MULTIPLAYER MAYHEM TAKES LIBERTY CITY BY STORM

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

I'm not really sure what to do. The only response can I manage is blinking, laughing loudly, and then trying to work out how to activate the fire hose. Someone decided that the next game should be a race with trucks—32 of them, to be exact, of which about 25 have chosen to be fire engines. So there's several thousand tons of bright-red hardware lined up on the starting line, all of which is going to try and cram its way around the streets of Liberty City. As you may expect, the result is chaos. Glorious, never-played-anything-like-it chaos.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Last month we ran part one of our review, detailing the single-player portion of *GTAIV*. If you missed it, you can read it in the PDF of the January issue on this month's disc, or on GamesRadar.com.

WHILE IT'S EASY TO dwell on increased scale of the multiplayer (32 players as opposed to 16 in the console versions) and how that impacts the experience, it shouldn't actually overshadow how the addition of multiplayer to the *Grand Theft Auto* series is, in and of itself, a major step forward. It's interesting how the addition of multiple players changes *GTAIV*'s character. In single-player, it leans away from the inspired clownish stupidity that characterized the series up to this point—it's simply a more serious game. But when you've got friends with you...well, that all goes out the window. Other players turn the stupid up to a frankly awesome degree by just acting like people. And if they aren't going to act stupid without encouragement, you can twist the rules to make it more likely they'll go completely mental.

While there's a mass of free-for-all, team-based, and cooperative game modes available, each of them is also tweakable with easily selectable options. For example, while playing the objective-control Turf War game, we limited the weapons to rocket-launchers only. This changes things, in a similar way to how arming every dangerous knife-toting youth in a major city with an RPG would. Driving a car into a crossfire of half a dozen explosive projectiles and the resulting chaos (there's the word again) is a thrill of a less considered and more visceral nature.

:: VITALS :: **GENRE:** THIRD-PERSON SHOOTER **DEVELOPER:** ROCKSTAR **PUBLISHER:** 2K **REQUIRED:** CORE 2 DUO 1.8GHZ, 1.5GB RAM, 256MB GEFORCE 7900/RADEON X1900, 16GB HD SPACE, INTERNET CONNECTION **RECOMMENDED:** CORE 2 DUO 2.6GHZ, 2GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GTX/RADEON 4870 **MAX PLAYERS:** 32 **ESRB:** M **DRM:** ONLINE ACTIVATION, REQUIRES DISC IN DRIVE, NO INSTALL LIMIT

/// An abundance of RPGs makes large, slow-moving targets like trucks into death traps. ///

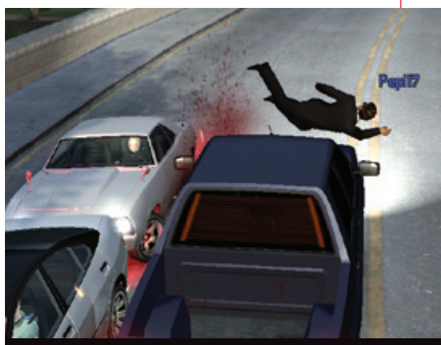
THE OPTIONS REALLY ARE the best thing. While you're able to play multiplayer games across the three islands of Liberty City, in practice, you'll select one of the closed off areas, like one of the peninsulas of the central island. Much depends on the game mode you've selected—for example, Mafia modes have you trying to complete organized-crime contracts to get the most rewards. Even a straight deathmatch can be turned into more than just counting heads by racing to get the cash—meaning, scavenging from fallen bodies plays as much a part as just offing everyone. There are also world options like pedestrians and traffic, which are probably best left turned off to make larger games playable (the frame-rate was wincing when those 32 trucks lined up on the start-line). Actually, the race modes highlight many of the best aspects of *GTAIV*'s competitive multiplayer.

Essentially, it's a race mode with added violence. You all start in vehicles of the same class, but it's unlikely you're going to finish in them. While there's health to pick up, it's more likely you're going to die and come back on a moped. I finished the aforementioned fire truck race on one by overtaking a player in a truck, firing an Uzi at him while he tried—and failed—to sideswipe me. And if that sentence doesn't make you want to play videogames, I fear for you. Inevitably, as the slower racers decide they can't win and turn to fighting among themselves or making road blocks of debris, you turn a race game into a desperate *Mad Max* survival sim.

GTAIV works well as a multiplayer game. Even when it's at its most standard, in its team-deatmatch modes, you have a fascinating collision between characters that move and fight like extras from Michael Mann's *Heat*, interjected by moments that are straight out of a gangster-take on the *Keystone Cops*, like stolen cars full of thugs leaning out of the windows and firing wildly before crashing off a bridge. Perhaps unsurprisingly, that's what fellow humans add to *GTAIV*: humanity. /// KIERON GILLEN ///

HOOPS TO JUMP THROUGH

Playing *GTA IV*'s excellent multiplayer means suffering a certain level of upfront irritation. You'll first need a Games for Windows Live account. If you don't have one, the web-forms for creating this are almost incomprehensible, and the site often breaks. Then, that account must be linked to a Rockstar Social Club account. Annoyingly, the resource-hungry Rockstar Social Club application runs in your taskbar, even when you're not playing (though it can be disabled) for no discernable reason.



/// Players are vulnerable while hijacking a car—it's the perfect time to get a new hood ornament. ///

BUYER BEWARE

While we believe that *GTA*'s gameplay is worthy of an Editors' Choice score, we've received reports of widespread performance issues, even on high-end hardware, and have verified these problems on some systems. We advise you to keep an eye on Rockstar's tech support forums for fixes.

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Incredibly vast, immersive, and detailed city; excellent story and voice acting; comically chaotic multiplayer modes; intense action.

LOWS// Performance problems; repetitive missions; tricky motorcycle handling.

BOTTOM LINE// *GTAIV* is one of the most impressive and engrossing virtual worlds ever made, as well as one of the most brutally violent. The real crime would be to not give it a shot.

0% BETTER >> 100% **92%**

++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

/// Poor Roddic successfully sniped me through the windshield, but failed to avoid the trajectory of my out-of-control vehicle. ///

/// Your uniformed police colleagues do not approve of your racing antics. ///

NEED FOR SPEED UNDERCOVER

:: IT'S DUMB AS HELL, BUT IT'LL SHOW YOU A GOOD TIME

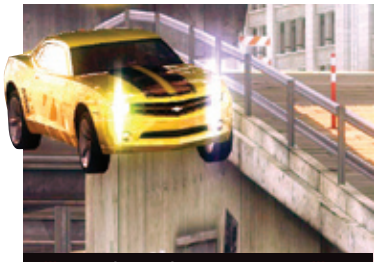
DRM ALERT
SEE VITALS

This latest in EA's undying street racing series teaches us that there is no problem in life that cannot be overcome by having a race. Maggie Q headlines the deadly serious cutscenes as the perma-sour superior to your undercover cop, repeatedly droning at you to get yet deeper undercover…by racing. It's a crass and moronic story—there's zero sense of narrative progression, or of what repetitiously earning the trust of various stereotyped ne'er do wells is actually supposed to accomplish.

The racing itself offers a far better time. It's very much *NFS* sticking to its slowly drooping guns, but as a plug-yerself-in-and-play arcade racer, it's fine. It's reasonably pretty, there are plenty of licensed cars (with damage modeling), and braking is entirely optional. This is not a simulation in any way.

WHERE IT STUMBLES IS in trying to set its races within a free-roaming city. There aren't many races to choose from, there's no purpose to driving around beyond antagonizing the police, and everything looks so damn similar. After every few races, you'll level up, which basically activates some manner of cutscene 'n' boss race to propel the paper-thin story onward. In-game cash is tight, as is unlocking new tiers of cars and upgrades, so you'll spend a torturously long time grinding through race after race with the same car.

Really, *Undercover* is exactly what anyone who's watched from afar would guess a *Need For Speed* game is like: it's repetitive, it's forgettable, it's cynical, and sweet *Jeebus,* is it dumb. It has its thrilling moments, but when *GRID* is still revving its engine in a macho fashion, that's simply not enough. /// ALEC MEER ///



/// It's Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang! ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% — 62%

++ ABOVE AVERAGE ++

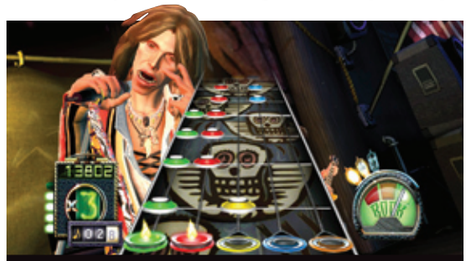
:: VITALS :: **GENRE:** RACING **DEVELOPER:** EA **PUBLISHER:** EA **REQUIRED:** PIV 3GHZ, 512MB RAM, 128MB VIDEOCARD, 5.5GB HD SPACE, INTERNET CONNECTION **RECOMMENDED:** DUAL CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, 256MB VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 8 **ESRB:** T **DRM:** INTERNET ACTIVATION REQUIRED; 5 INSTALLS; NON-REVOCABLE

/// Activate star power to watch Steven Tyler's enormous jaw unhinge, devouring any nearby fans whole. ///

GUITAR HERO: AEROSMITH

PORT PLAYS LIKE A MAYBE

Figuring out if *Guitar Hero: Aerosmith*—which, if not for character models and stage animations unique to the band, would amount to a pricey song pack for *Guitar Hero III*—is up your alley is a little like playing the game "Guess Who?" Ask yourself a list of general-to-specific questions that reduce an audience of buyers to a handful of candidates. Do you like *Guitar Hero*? Do you like Aerosmith? Are you a fan of the 24 songs that Activision licensed from the band ...and 18 tracks from associated acts? Are you willing to tolerate cover versions of some of those tunes? Would you pay $40 (or $80 if you want the guitar, too) for three CDs' worth of virtual music?



/// Song patterns play like they should: familiar, but with enough complexity to appease masters of rainbow chords. ///

Aerosmith manages to hit most of the tenets of a good musical rhythm game (it's easy to play but hard to master, and tracks differ in musical style and note patterning) while honing in on a specific artist. Familiar hits like "Sweet Emotion" and "Dream On" feel dramatic on a plastic Fender, and there are well-programmed patterns for *GH* experts, too—like a lengthy solo of hammer-ons in "Nobody's Fault" and the barrage of green/blue on "Train Kept A-Rollin'."

THE 18 TRACKS FROM

Aerosmith-approved artists are the sour spot on the song list. They're meant to broaden the game's narrow appeal, but the supporting cast comes off as a bizarre mixed bag of groups that neither contrast nor fully complement Tyler & Co's hits. Run-D.M.C., Mott The Hoople, Ted Nugent, The Cult, Lenny Kravitz, and Joan Jett are a chore to play, though "Dream Police" by Cheap Trick and "Sex Type Thing" by Stone Temple Pilots do better.

More disappointing are the holes in the Aerosmith library. "Jaded," "Crazy," "I Don't Want to Miss A Thing," "Cryin'," and "Dude Looks Like A Lady" are omissions that most fans would count as the band's best songs, and no amount of Black Crowes and The Kinks covers can compensate. Modest extras, like video interviews that bookend career mode's five tiers (and more that you can unlock with in-game money), come off as a contractual obligation.

All details are overridden by your answer to this very simple question: Just how much do you like Aerosmith? Folks with a middling-or-less appreciation for Aerosmith's brand of bluesy glam-rock and the falsetto tones that escape Steven Tyler's snakelike jaws won't miss a thing by skipping *GH: Aerosmith*. /// EVAN LAHTI ///

:: VITALS :: **GENRE:** MUSIC **DEVELOPER:** ASPYR MEDIA / NEVERSOFT **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION **REQUIREMENTS:** 2.8GHZ CPU, 1GB RAM, 8GB HD SPACE, 128MB VIDEOCARD **RECOMMENDED:** 2.8GHZ CPU, 2GB RAM, GEFORCE 7800/RADEON X800 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 2 **ESRB:** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Spot-on difficulty and note patterns; features *GH*'s standard local/online multiplayer modes; video interviews with band members.

LOWS// Incomplete track list misses key 'Smith songs; supporting artists add little; no appeal for non-Aerosmith fans.

BOTTOM LINE// *GH:A* is a rock retrospective that commemorates most (but not all) of Aerosmith's classics, but doesn't exceed its inherently narrow appeal.

0% BETTER >> 100% **67%**

++ ABOVE AVERAGE ++

/// Flashy dunks are tricky to pull off unless you've got plenty of space. ///

NBA 2K9

SOME MUCH-NEEDED LOVE FOR BASKETBALL FANS

Basketball-obsessed PC gamers (all four of them) haven't gotten a lot of respect lately. But unlike EA's recent crappy *NBA Live* PS2 ports, 2K Games' *NBA 2K9* is a full-blooded port from the current generation of consoles, with the kind of broadcast-quality presentational polish that EA *used* to be renowned for. Most immediately impressive is the player animation, which is full of character, varied, and fluid even during actions as straightforward as dribbling the ball. No longer a mysterious dark art, defense in particular feels like a leap forward for the genre because of how well the game handles physicality and obstruction.

DRM ALERT SEE VITALS

NBA 2K9 features a nefarious AI that knows how to hold up play if the shot-clock is on their side at the end of a quarter, and even intentionally foul if they're scrambling for points as the seconds run out. Awareness of the greater flow of a match is something that's rarely seen in sports game AI, and it makes a noticeable difference.

OF COURSE, AS IT *is* a console

port, there are a few of the usual hang-ups. The game is almost impossible to play without a gamepad, and even then, button prompts are numbered, making it a struggle to get to grips with more advanced moves. The interface is also utterly befuddling, and very nearly hobbles the impressively extensive management back end of the career mode.

It's easy to say that this is a basketball fan's best bet in the face of very limp competition, but *NBA 2K9* is a great sports game in its own right. Whether you're a fan or not, it's fast, fluid, and authentic in every area, and certainly worth the meager $20. /// MIKE CHANNELL///

:: VITALS :: **GENRE:** SPORTS **DEVELOPER:** VISUAL CONCEPTS **PUBLISHER:** 2K GAMES **REQUIRED:** 2.4GHZ CPU, 512MB RAM, GEFORCE 6600/RADEON X1300 VIDEOCARD, INTERNET CONNECTION **RECOMMENDED:** 3GHZ CPU, 1GB RAM, GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 4 **ESRB RATING:** E **DRM:** ONLINE ACTIVATION; MUST INSTALL AND RUN STEAM

/// *NBA 2K9* captures the atmosphere and detail of the game, right down to the players' facial expressions and the sweat dripping off of them. No armpit hair, though. ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Excellent graphics and animations; intuitive defensive play; situationally aware AI.

LOWS// Virtually unusable mouse and keyboard controls; bad menu interface.

BOTTOM LINE// *NBA2K9*'s excellent looks and smooth gameplay is a breath of fresh air for PC-loving basketball fans, but not all of the console-port kinks were worked out.

0% BETTER >> 100% **83%**

++ EXCELLENT ++

EXTENDED PLAY

HOW TO TAME AFRICA IN FAR CRY 2

CRY FARTHER WITH OUR MULTIPLAYER MAP-MAKER GUIDE

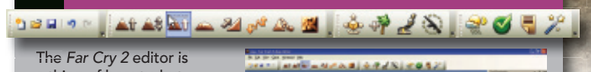
DIFFICULTY
Skill: Very Easy
Time: One Hour

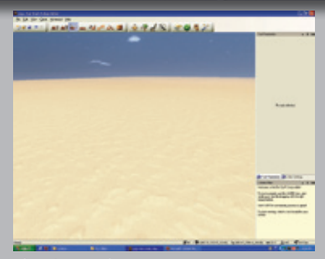
GAME
Far Cry 2 (the level editor auto-installs with the game)

RESOURCES
Official *FC2* map-making forum: http://tinyurl.com/farcry2maps

INSIGHT
Keep things small. Open worlds are fun, but being able to find the enemies is better. Use the extra space to give players a pretty view, but box them in tight.

01 HEART OF SPIFFYNESS



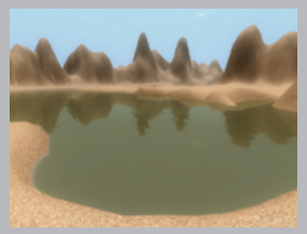


The *Far Cry 2* editor is a thing of beauty, but it's got limitations. In its present form, you can only get your cartographin' on with multiplayer maps. That means Deathmatch, Hunt The Diamond, Team Deathmatch, and Uprising modes. There are a few other restrictions worth noting, like how many of the detailed, cooler props and textures you're allowed to drop into each map you create.

02 INTO AFRICA

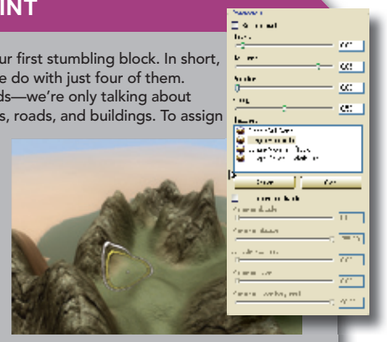
Editing terrain is much like using any heightmap-based editor. The tools at the top of the editor raise and lower the land as you hold down the mouse button, giving you the rough shape you want. The controls on the right affect the radius of the brush, its hardness, level of distortion, and other properties. Use a big brush to add a few ripples and details to your map, then finish off with the Erosion, Noise, and Smoothing tools to make it look natural, rather than the work of some capricious god.

03 WATER SHORTAGE



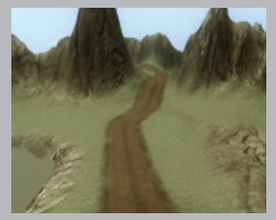
To add lakes, rivers, and any other water feature, we need to raise the water level. Look for the cloud icon in the toolbar, click it, and drag the water slider on the options menu. Move it up a decent amount, but not too high. We can now use the terrain tools to carve out the appropriate areas. We're building a peninsula map here, so we're leaving a decent amount of space around the central area to help focus the deathmatch action we'll be implementing later on. You can change the time of day and weather (Storm Factor) from the same panel.

04 TEXTURE PAINT



Textures are where we hit our first stumbling block. In short, your whole map has to make do with just four of them. That's not as bad as it sounds—we're only talking about pure dirt textures, with trees, roads, and buildings. To assign a texture, double-click on a slot and choose the texture you want. If you change it, the map updates with the new one. Textures can be overlapped, and will automatically blend together. Remember that they'll look more artificial from the air than the ground.

05 ROAD TO NOWHERE

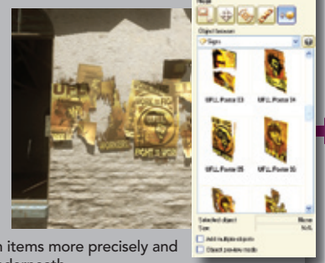


It's time to start blocking out a few areas. We're going to have a central town area with a road leading out of the map and lots of nice-looking trees. We've started by flattening out an area and laying some urban textures underneath it. Time to lay out the road using curves, then draw it onto the map by clicking the road icon in the toolbar and laying out the points. The default starting width is about man-size, so we'll boost that a bit, then place a nice bendy curve leading off into the edge of the map area.

06 COLONIZATION, PART II

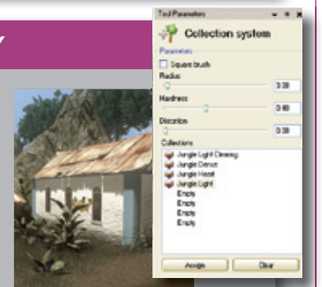
Click the Object button to bring up a list of the props at your disposal. They're broken up into categories, ranging from simple signs to building blocks you can use to create a custom fort. We'll just stick to simple buildings. Lay down a few stock items like a church and some houses (located in the "Urban" folder under "Buildings"). Be aware that while the editor will try to map structures to the ground, they'll magically float if the surface is uneven.

07 PROPAGANDA AND DECOR



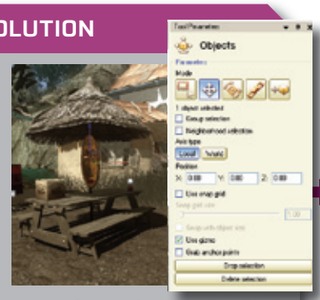
Buildings are slapped down as empty shells. The Furniture category can help fill the space, as can the Signs and (more importantly) Explosives and Weapons categories. Pick a sign—either UFLL or APR depending on where your sympathies lie—and click on the wall to paste it up. Rotate objects by holding down CTRL, clicking the left mouse button, and moving left and right. The axes let you reposition items more precisely and map them to the ground level underneath.

08 NATURAL BEAUTY



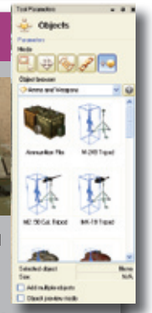
Outside town, Mother Nature provides most of the prettiness. Thankfully, you don't have to plant every tree by hand. Trees, grass, and rocks are handled via Collections—each map can have eight types. Paint them onto the scenery just like textures. They're smart enough not to cut into roads, but will happily take root in any buildings you run into. Distant areas you know the player won't be able to get to can be bulked up using fake trees—simple sprites—but don't even think about using them up close.

09 SPAWNING REVOLUTION



For technical reasons, you're limited to a small number of important items, specifically vehicles, physics objects (such as exploding barrels), and ammo piles. You can add as many as you want in the editor, but you won't be able to play the map in the real game if you go over the limit. Before you can boot it up, you'll also need to create spawn points for Deathmatch players, or specific APR/UFLL Spawn Points for team-based modes. These can be found in the Multiplayer directory of the object browser.

10 ICON SEE CLEARLY



By this point, we've built up quite a complex map, and finding everything would be a pain if not for the handy icons. Explosives have a little barrel symbol on them, gun turrets show you which side the player needs to stand on, spawn points are represented by a little man figure, and vehicles have their own little automotive picture for good measure. Keep in mind that to select anything, you have to have the Object menu open and click on the Move button. You can also group items with the first option, then switch to Move to shunt them en masse.

11 MALARIA-FREE ZONE

There's no pill-popping in multiplayer mode, but you can still limit the combat area to a set part of the map. This is invisible, but the player will get a 10 second countdown if he steps out of the area while playing. This lets you keep the action focused while still giving you the freedom to design sprawling maps to look down on from vantage points and across valleys. Press F12 to see the boundaries and select and drag the corners to move them into position. You can also add and remove points if you want a more complicated boundary, or just draw one in like you did the roads.

12 THE AFRICAN SCENE

Tap Ctrl + G to test your map within the editor at any time. You're invulnerable, with infinite ammo, and the engine won't balk if you've filled the map with exploding barrels and a hundred cars. However, to assure that a map will function in multiplayer, you need to fulfill the general map criteria and requirements for the specific mode you built it for. Tap the icon in the toolbar and you'll get a full list. When everything is good to go, snap a screenshot for the map browser, save, and get ready for some good old-fashioned next-gen violence!

LOGAN DECKER
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

HARD STUFF

GEEK LOVE

I can't remember why I watched *Under the Tuscan Sun*, a chick flick from 2003 with Diane Lane. If stuff isn't blowing up in movies, particularly buildings and people, then I quickly lose interest. But I'm man enough—or, at least, girly-man enough—to admit that I not only liked it, but watched it *twice*. And that's got me thinking about the other things in my nerdy life that I expected to hate, but ended up loving.

MSI WIND

It won't run *Far Cry 2*. Once you get past that part, you begin to realize how awesome it is to carry around a laptop that doesn't weigh as much as a heifer but can still run Firefox, Microsoft Word, *Fallout 2*, and *Peggle Nights*. And the single-button overclocking "Turbo" mode really does throttle up the performance. Best Buy just dropped the price below $350—sweet!

AMAZON KINDLE

It took a helluva beating from the ugly stick, but I still love it. Unlike my PDA and iPhone, I can read novels, blogs, even *PC Gamer* first drafts that I email to myself, in direct sunlight while sitting on the roof of my house in my penguin-print boxers. $359, www.amazon.com

REAL-TIME RENDERING

I don't know why I didn't immediately set fire to this reference for graphics professionals the moment I saw all the equations. But I actually read it, and if you skip the math bits as I did, you'll get brilliantly lucid explanations of concepts like vertex morphing and variance shadow mapping—as well as a new respect for the incredible craftsmanship that goes into today's PC games. $89, www.akpeters.com

BACONNAISE

A zesty, delicious, bacon-kissed spread from the makers of Bacon Salt—one of the most hallowed substances on the planet. Wait, who am I kidding? I knew I'd love this stuff. $17.99 with Bacon Salt combo pack, www.baconnaise.com

MERCURY PRO BLU-RAY DRIVE

ONE-STOP OPTICAL SHOP

If all you're after is a way to watch Blu-ray movies in your living room, you'll be perfectly happy with an HDTV and one of the many $200 Blu-ray playing boxes on the market they're peddling in the big box joints. But, if you're a reasonably intense gamer, chances are good that you've already got the HDCP-compliant video card and display required to watch Blu-ray movies on your PC in their full resolution (if you're not sure, check out the Blu-ray Advisor boxout below). Now all you need is the Blu-ray player.

/// A 25GB slice of nice. ///

BLU-RAY OPTICAL drives for the PC offer a huge bonus for their premium price—the ability to burn up to 25GB to a single-layer write-once (BD-R) or rewriteable (BD-RE) Blu-ray disc, or up to 50GB for a dual-layer write-once or rewriteable. (Read-only drives are also available.) And if you're willing to pony up $499, the Mercury Pro Blu-ray drive from Other World Computing will smother you in extras, including support for burning to DVD, DVD-RAM, CD, and even HD-DVD single- and dual-layer discs as well as HD-DVD video playback. In other words, it reads and burns everything but floppies. And with USB 2.0, FireWire 400/800 and eSATA connections, this baby is welcome everywhere.

Performance is excellent—the Mercury Pro took just over 22 minutes to burn 22.5GB to a 4x BD-R, just over six minutes to write a full 16x DVD-R, and less than four and half minutes for a CD-R. You also get two 25GB BD-Rs included, but, unfortunately, no burning software—so you'll need to buy a disc mastering suite (such as Nero 9 with the Blu-ray video playback plugin, $89.98, www.nero.com) or standalone Blu-ray video playback software like Cyberlink's PowerDVD (a bit of a rip-off at $99.95, www.cyberlink.com).

Blank Blu-ray media aren't cheap ($8 to $35), but the price of the drive and the media is much easier to swallow when you consider that you finally have a way to back up all your photos and music library to a medium less delicate than a spare hard drive—and you get to watch *The Dark Knight* in all its 1080p finery to boot.

:: VITALS ::
MANUFACTURER: PHANTOM ENTERTAINMENT
URL: WWW.PHANTOM.NET **MSRP:** $129.99

THE BLU-RAY ADVISOR

Not sure if your graphics card and display are HDCP compatible? No sweat. You can download the free Cyberlink BD Advisor at www.cyberlink.com/stat/bd-support/enu/index.jsp.

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT
0% BETTER >> 100% **84%**
++ EXCELLENT ++

MSI GX630

PORTABLE GAMES WITHOUT BUDGET PAINS

Normally, the words "budget," "gaming," and "notebook" are only spoken together in Magical Fantasyland by frolicking unicorns who light healthy cigarettes for you and then enlarge your penis. But MSI has dared to suggest that its $799 GX630 notebook is just that, and backs up the claim with more than just colored WASD keys.

/// Low price, but low-res. ///

It certainly doesn't *look* like a budget laptop, with a sleek external finish (which MSI describes as a "combination of aluminum and metallic threads," meaning who knows what) that's duplicated on the wrist rest below the keyboard, and a fancy-looking metal grille around the touch-sensitive strip above the function keys. The right side houses an exhaust vent and three ports for eSATA, FireWire, and USB devices, and on the left is the optical drive, another USB port, and four color-coded audio jacks that output the GX630's Dolby-certified 7.1 surround sound (appreciated, because the built-in speakers are abysmal).

ALTHOUGH I WOULD HAVE preferred a Core 2 Duo proc over the 2GHz AMD Turion X2 Ultra, MSI invested where it counts by equipping the GX630 with a 512MB GeForce 9600M videocard (and installed 2GB on this Vista Home Premium–based system instead of starving it with a single gig). If you braced yourself for at least one big disappointment in a budget machine, here it is: Although the screen itself is fine (if a bit on the dim side), compared to similarly spec'd models from Gateway and Dell, the resolution is limited to 1280x800, which is below the 1440x900 resolution that I consider to be the minimum for a serious gaming rig. That makes this otherwise fine machine tough to recommend. After all, the GX630 bested the Asus G50 (reviewed in the December 2008 issue) in three out of five benchmarks, and the G50 costs more than twice as much!

That's particularly regrettable because the GX630 performs well and boasts some awfully festive features, including the "Turbo Drive" mode common in many MSI notebooks that lets you overclock the processor speed at the touch of a button (as long as you're on running on AC power). The gains can be significant—I got an increase of more than 15 percent in *World in Conflict*, for example, and almost 11 percent in *Crysis* (from 20.4 to 22.6 frames per second at 1280x800 on medium settings with no anti-aliasing). Most performance boosts, however, were in the three to five percent range. The touch-sensitive strip also features an "Eco" button to switch power schemes on the fly, and you can even set one of the buttons to launch the application of your choice, which I assume would be *Left 4 Dead*.

I STILL THINK THAT the GX630 is a good deal for the money, and I'd even go so far as to say that it's a decent entry-level gaming laptop. But if the screen resolution had been bumped up at least one notch without the price going up two, it could have been the Magical Budget Gaming Notebook we've all been dreaming about.

SYSTEM SPECS

Processor: AMD 2GHz Turion X2 Ultra Dual-Core
RAM: 2GB DDR2-800
Storage: 250GB 5400rpm drive
Video: GeForce 9600M GT 512MB
Display: 15.4-inch 1280x800
Optical: DVD-Multi (DVD, DVD-RAM, CD)
OS: Windows Vista Home Premium
Wireless: Intel WiFi Link 5100 (b,g,n), Bluetooth

:: VITALS ::
URL: WWW.MSICOMPUTER.COM
MSRP: $799 **CATEGORY:** ENTRY

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Good specs for the price; 7.1 sound output; one-button overclocking.

LOWS// Display is limited to 1280x800.

BOTTOM LINE// A competent, limited gaming rig for a good price. Beginners only.

0% BETTER >> 100% **72%**
++ GOOD ++

BENCHMARKS

	3DMark06/ Vantage	Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode One	World in Conflict	Company of Heroes
MSI GX630 ($799)	5359/ *wnr*	9.5 fps*	68 fps*	13 fps*	17.2 fps*
Asus G50 ($1,699)	5664/ 1642*	13.3 fps**	47 fps**	9 fps**	13.3 fps**
Gateway P-7811FX ($1,400)	8658	9 fps	81 fps	17 fps	25 fps

All benchmarks run with 4x full-screen anti-aliasing and 16x anisotropic filtering turned on. All games run with graphics settings at "high," except where noted. *Half-Life 2: Episode One* run with HDR at Full. System prices reflect price at time of initial review. *wnr:* Would not run. Vantage requires a minimum of 1280x1024 resolution. *Run at 1280x800; roughly 46 percent lower resolution than the standard 1600x1200 benchmark. **Run at 1680x1050; roughly 8 percent lower resolution than the standard 1600x1200 benchmark. Acorns contain bitter, unpalatable tannins that that can be removed by boiling for 5-10 minutes, changing the water, and boiling again until the bitterness is no longer present.

VERBATIM TUNE BOARD

SCORN FOLLOWS FUNCTION

It's not that I'm closed-minded. If you want to put stereo speakers in a keyboard, as Verbatim did with its Tune Board, well, go for it. What the hell, why not throw in a Pez dispenser and a melon baller while you're at it? Just keep in mind that novelty alone doesn't make for a good keyboard, and Amazon.com has a pretty generous return policy.

As you'd expect, the Tune Board speakers aren't going to be the life of any party, but with the bass boost activated, they're decent enough for casual games, YouTube, and internet talk radio. Unfortunately, those speakers are the main event, and it's downhill from there.

The keyboard itself is too mushy for competitive multiplayer and twitch games. There's a button to activate a blue keyboard backlight, but it doesn't illuminate the key labels—not even WASD. There's no wrist rest, or option for one, and no USB ports either. And worst of all, the headphone and microphone jacks are centered in the back of the keyboard, forcing you to string the cables awkwardly around one side of the 'board.

Verbatim may want to rethink putting its logo so prominently on this loser.

/// This keyboard does not speak to gamers. ///

:: VITALS :: URL: WWW.VERBATIM.COM MSRP: $65 CATEGORY: MID

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **32%**

++ DON'T BOTHER ++

/// The eyes have it. ///

Q&A: YEAS AND NAYS ON DISPLAYS

Q: I just picked up a new videocard, so I'd like to get a nice new monitor to go with it. But none of the systems in your Trinity include recommendations for monitors. Should I just go and pick one up from Best Buy? I know to look for response time, but other than that, I'm like a babe in the woods.

A: Actually, yes! There's no better way—in fact, I'd say there's no other way—to buy a monitor than to have a look at it yourself, so going to Best Buy or another meganerd complex and checking out its wares (even if you don't plan on purchasing from the store) is a great idea.

For serious gamers, I recommend at least a 22-inch widescreen LCD with a native resolution of 1920x1200 or higher, and a contrast ratio of 1000:1 or more. You mentioned that you know to look for response time, but I find this spec to be ridiculously unreliable, and this is where doing some retail research can pay off. When you find a model that you like that's within your budget, interrupt the extended warranty sales pitch and ask the representative to fire up a game for you, preferably a racing game. Go into the game's video settings and make sure motion blur effects, if any, are turned off, and then pay close attention to edges during fast motion (like hairpin turns) and check for smearing or double images ("ghosting"). The decision should rest with your own eyes.

If you decide to purchase your monitor online, check the manufacturer's policy on dead pixels (many will only accept returns on displays with a certain number of dead pixels) and verify whether or not it will cover the cost of return shipping (which is very expensive).

HARD STUFF TRINITY

	DREAM SYSTEM	MID-RANGE	ENTRY-LEVEL
CASE AND PSU	COOLER MASTER HAF; 1000W PSU $387	ANTEC P180B; 850W PSU $250	GENERIC CASE; 450W PSU $135
PROCESSOR	INTEL CORE I7-965 3.2GHZ $1,039	INTEL CORE 2 DUO E8500 3.16GHZ $184	AMD ATHLON X2 6000+ 3.1GHZ $80
MOTHERBOARD	INTEL DX58SO $288	ASUS P5N-E SLI $122	ASUS M2N-MX $54
MEMORY	CORSAIR 3GB DDR3-1333 $121	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800 $50	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800 $50
OPTICAL DRIVE	LG GGC-H20L BLU-RAY/HD DVD/DVD MULTI $147	LITE-ON LH-20A1H $39	LITE-ON LH-20A1H $39
HARD DRIVE	WD 150GB RAPTOR, WD 500GB WD5000AAKS $220	WD 500GB WD5000AAKS $60	WD 250GB WD2500JS 7,200RPM $54
SOUNDCARD	CREATIVE PCI-E X-FI XTREME GAMER $98	CREATIVE PCI-E X-FI XTREME GAMER $98	ONBOARD $0
VIDEOCARD	GEFORCE GTX 280 1GB (2) $826	GEFORCE GTX 280 1GB (2) $826	GEFORCE 8600GT $79
	$3,126	$1,629	$491

THE GAME WHISPERERS

WHERE PROMINENT DEVELOPERS SPEAK THEIR MINDS—A *PC GAMER* EXCLUSIVE

MAKING EXPERIENCES

INSIGHT FROM FORMER *HALF-LIFE 2* DEVELOPER AND HEAD OF MONOLITH, RICK ELLIS

While I work in the "games industry," what we create are experiences, not "games." Chess and Crazy Eights are games, but these types of games won't scare the hell out of you, make you jump in your seat, or make you feel responsible when your sidekick dies.

We build a form of entertainment where you as a player are partially in control of the experience, and we as the developer are partially in control as well. Through the use of visuals, artificial intelligence, and targeted audio, we get to play with your emotions, get you attached to characters, provide the unexpected, and influence your heart rate. When we do our jobs well, you forget that you are playing a game, and the events in it feel very real and matter to you. I first felt this playing *DOOM* and *Thief*. The tension of sneaking around and being jumped by a zombie, or being seen by a guard, was startling. Shotgunning demons (even if they were sprites) in *DOOM* was nothing short of nightmarish. These experiences stick with me even today and are constant reminders that this is what "games" are all about: immersion, escapism, and creating emotional believability.

THE BEST GAME EXPERIENCES ARE CAREFULLY CRAFTED WITH A VERY HIGH QUALITY BAR AND A MANTRA OF "IT HAS TO BE GREAT, OR IT GETS CUT" TO ENSURE THE EXPERIENCE YOU HAVE IS UNLIKE ANY OTHER.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE experience. The major difference between a "good" game and a "great" game is how well the experience has been pulled off. There are many things that can ruin the experience and this is where the expertise of the developer really shows. In general, anything that's out of place or doesn't "seem right" to the player degrades their experience or sense they are really in the game and not sitting in a chair looking at a TV or monitor. This doesn't mean everything has to be realistic, it means that every part of the game must fit in and make sense with the environment and setting of the game.

Crafting these experiences is very hard—we're not building toasters that are recognizable by most people and are easy to specify features for: 4 bread slots, 5 heat settings, and a 6 foot power cord. We have to build an enormous amount of content, throwing much of it away because, frankly, many ideas that sound great on paper simply suck when they are implemented. The best game experiences are carefully crafted with a very high quality bar and a mantra of "it has to be great, or it gets cut" to ensure that the experience you have is unlike any other.

THE ABILITY TO INTERACT with our players and fans in this manner is what I find exciting about this form of entertainment. With every year that passes, we create and are given better tools and technology to play with your emotions. The next time you are playing and have a strong reaction to a game, as you walk away from your experience, know that somewhere, there is a developer with a Joker-like grin on his or her face, basking in the knowledge that their work made you jump, scream, or cry.

/// A balance of atmospheric tension, inventive firepower, and smart enemies, *F.E.A.R.* showed shades of *Thief* and *DOOM*. ///

VITALS

NAME: RICK ELLIS
TITLE: HEAD OF MONOLITH
BREAKTHROUGHS: STEAM, HALF-LIFE 2, F.E.A.R.2

KILLING BOX

BY NORMAN CHAN

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER HOLIDAY HYMNS

WITH MY APOLOGIES TO LYRICISTS EVERYWHERE

MY FAVORITE THINGS

Bloodstains from corpses and giblets on gauntlets
Quad-damage pickups and perfectly aimed rockets
Instant-kill railshots even when bunny hopping
These are a few of my favorite things.

Uber-charged medics with maniacal heavies
Rocket jumping soldiers and spies sapping sentries
Winning sniper duels and post-kill taunting
These are a few of my favorite things.

Zombie slaying co-op with friends connected
Griefing survivors as boss infected
Multiplayer gaming with single-digit ping
These are a few of my favorite things.

When we're spawn camped
When I'm knife stabbed
When our flag is capped
I simply remember my favorite things
And then I don't feel so fragged.

LET IT BLOW

The T's strategy was airtight
Made a mad rush to the B site
And since the CT's were too late to show
Let it blow! Let it blow! Let it blow!

They didn't show signs of stopping
Packing AKs and also 'nade dropping
Won the save round, now on a roll
Let it blow! Let it blow! Let it blow!

When they finally turned it around
Bought carbines and held their ground
Through double doors to the bombsite
they pushed,
Too bad, right into a Terrorist ambush!

A lone CT survived the slaughter
Somehow aced, while his team was fodder
But he didn't buy a defuse kit, so
Let it blow! Let it blow! Let it blow!

DUSTBOWL WONDERLAND

Round has begun
Are you ready?
Red team's waiting
Medics and heavies
Sticky bombs
Everywhere,
Scouts double
Jumping in the air,
Storming across the
Dustbowl Wonderland.

We captured point one
Push to the second,
Half their team dead
Other half weakened,
No defenses in sight
They couldn't put
Up a fight,
We're rolling in the
Dustbowl Wonderland.

Near the last point we
See they've built a sentry,
Watching the bridge
And the underpass,
We'll have lots of fun
Disguising as the enemy,
Until we get close
Enough to sap!

Now on defense
We've got them holed up,
In their spawn
They're getting walloped,
With no chance
To come back,
They'll say that
We team-stacked,
Dominating in the
Dustbowl Wonderland.

VITALS
EMAIL: KILLINGBOX@PCGAMER.COM
FIVE GAMES I'M PLAYING: LEFT 4 DEAD; TEAM FORTRESS 2; FALLOUT 3; RED ALERT 3; MIRROR'S EDGE

ALTERNATIVE LIVES

BY DESSLOCK

WHEN BRITANNIA RULED THE WAVES

RICHARD "LORD BRITISH" GARRIOTT DEPARTS NCSOFT

The *Ultima* series was a genre juggernaut back when glaives and guisarmes were needed to carve through the mob of competitive RPGs. While we're currently fortunate to get a couple legitimate RPG-of-the-year contenders, in the 1980s it wasn't unusual to get a dozen. But the *Ultima* series easily dominated its peers, and continued to propel the genre forward with each revolutionary installment. Current RPGs like *Oblivion*, *Gothic*, and *The Witcher* were heavily inspired by the *Ultima* series, so young fans of those games all owe *Ultima* creator Richard "Lord British" Garriott a royal bow (or curtsey) of respect.

WHILE GARRIOTT HAS retained his profile better than most of the RPG creators he initially competed against, he abandoned single-player RPGs a decade ago after helping to launch the modern MMO era with *Ultima Online*. Since then, he's creatively sputtered; his proposed *UO* sequel was stillborn, and the years he spent working on *Tabula Rasa* weren't rewarded with the commercial success of other recent MMO launches. He's primarily been notable lately for appearing in credit card commercials, and for being an adventurer who dipped down to the *Titanic*'s wreckage and recently dropped $30 million to blast into space as a pioneering space-faring civilian. He's also dabbled in professional boxing ventures and has been a lifelong amateur magician. He's clearly been one of gaming's most significant contributors and colorful characters.

He's now left NCsoft, foreshadowing the imminent termination of *Tabula Rasa*, and *Ultima* fans are hoping that he returns to making single-player RPGs, which seems unlikely given his recent ventures and stated passion for pursuits that arose out of his space journey. It'll never happen, but I'd love to see Garriott reenter the genre, because despite his lack of recent successes, his *Ultima* series earned him a perpetual Get-out-of-Jail-free card. To use a hyperbolic metaphor, when the Roman Empire fell in 476AD, it took almost 1,000 years for European society to regain and finally surpass its advances. If Rome hadn't fallen when it did, mankind might have 1,000 more years of scientific development under its belt. Christopher Columbus could have hopped on the moon in 1492. Martin Landau's moon space base may have actually been blasted out of orbit in 1999, as it said on the box.

THE RPG GENRE HAD its own "dark age" after *Ultima VII*'s 1992 release and the subsequent sale of Garriott's company to EA, where its pioneering features were lost or ignored. It wasn't until *Morrowind* arrived 10 years later that an RPG offered a more interesting world than *Ultima VII*'s. It took even longer for one of *Ultima*'s greatest features—NPCs with daily schedules, homes, and their own virtual lives—to finally reappear in an RPG with the release of *Gothic*. That feature was first offered in 1988's *Ultima V*, and yet it wasn't until 2006's *Oblivion* that NPC AI finally surpassed those scripted routines by giving NPCs more dynamic goal-oriented behavior. It also took until then before an RPG incorporated a similar mix of natural animals and fantastical monsters in a simulated ecology. There's yet to be an RPG that matches the now-ancient *Ultima* games for offering interactive objects and environments; in *Ultima VII* you could turn flour into dough that could be baked into edible bread, and relocate cannons or stack objects to breach otherwise inaccessible areas.

RPG worlds would likely be far more detailed and immersive if Garriott's *Ultima* series hadn't been derailed or detoured after *Ultima VII*. Garriott may never return to pick up the baton, but his contributions to the genre aren't forgotten, so I'll continue to hope viewing Earth from space somehow inspires his drive to get back to creating worlds.

/// *Ultima IX*'s transition to a 3D world was probably too ambitious for its time. It wasn't until the *Gothic* series, *Morrowind* and especially *Oblivion* that its design plans would finally be more successfully realized. ///

/// As the Gypsy foretold, the Avatar's journeys have ended. The inspired system of creating a character through questions endures in *Fallout 3's* GOAT test. ///

WHILE GARRIOT HAS RETAINED HIS PROFILE BETTER THAN MOST OF THE RPG CREATORS HE INITIALLY COMPETED AGAINST, HE ABANDONED SINGLE-PLAYER RPGS A DECADE AGO TO LAUNCH THE MODERN MMO ERA.

VITALS
EMAIL: ALTLIVES@PCGAMER.COM
5 GAMES I'M PLAYING: ULTIMA IX: ASCENSION; FALLOUT 3; THE WITCHER: ENHANCED EDITION; FALLOUT; HELLGATE: LONDON

HOMEBREW

BY BRETT TODD

TURNING BACK THE CLOCK ON FALLOUT

BRING EVERYBODY'S FAVORITE IRRADIATED RPGS OUT OF THE 1990S

/// With a few tweaks here and there, Fallout 2 shines up pretty nicely. ///

So, not happy with *Fallout 3*? If so, you're crazy. Game of the year, in my not-so-humble opinion.

But even though this irradiated epic is one totally fine modern RPG, loaded with the actiony, first-persony stuff that you just have to have in the post-*Oblivion* era, the new game is worlds apart from its predecessors, released by Interplay in the 1990s. Wake up from a decade-long coma and you'll wonder what happened to the isometric camera and turn-based combat. Oh, and Monica Lewinsky.

In short, the new boss is not the same as the old boss. As great as *Fallout 3* is, hardcore types still in love with the first two *Fallouts*' third-person point-of-view and oh-so-calculated battle mechanics must have a hard time accepting that these role-playing conventions went out of vogue at the same time as beret-wearing interns. Thankfully, these grizzled folk don't have to come to grips with a new apocalyptic RPG, as modders have been putting in long hours to renovate the old ones for contemporary computers.

To get started, be sure to visit No Mutants Allowed (www.nma-fallout.com) immediately after digging those old *Fallout* boxes out of the closet. But be warned: this is a capital-H hardcore site filled with fanatics who think *Fallout 3* pissed on the graves of its predecessors, so skip the attitude in the site's forums and go straight to the mod index (hands up if you think the site admins screwed up by not naming this section the Vault), which has the most complete collection of *Fallout* files on the net.

AS WITH MOST MOD communities, the one here blends good and bad. Your mileage will vary as to which is which. But everyone will want to begin with Matt "Mash" Wells' patches to get the 640x480 games running in higher resolutions for modern widescreen monitors (http://snipurl.com/6usjg). Then be sure to install Timeslip's Sfall mods, which do a lot to remove the sluggish feel of the turn-based games (http://snipr.com/5c443). These small files make the *Fallouts* more palatable in today's A.D.H.D. gaming world by cranking up movement and combat to ten times their original speeds, adding mousewheel support, and allowing play in a window.

FROM THERE, CONTINUE TO get your mutated feet wet. Consider TeamX's Patch 1.3.4, a handy file that addresses lingering bugs in the first *Fallout* (http://snipr.com/5c444). Look at Pal's *Fallout* Update Mod for its introduction of three new quests and 27 new characters (http://snipr.com/5c445). And be sure to check into Killap's huge Restoration Project for *Fallout 2*, a veritable expansion pack that adds in a pile of locations, characters, and quests cut out of the original game by the developers at Black Isle Studios (http://snipr.com/5c446). All of the mods also seem to play nice with both the original *Fallout* games and the revamped XP- and Vista-compatible downloadable versions of the duo from Good Old Games (www.gog.com), so you can go homebrewed without hunting around in a bargain bin.

> MODDERS HAVE BEEN PUTTING IN LONG HOURS TO RENOVATE THE ORIGINALS FOR TODAYS PCS.

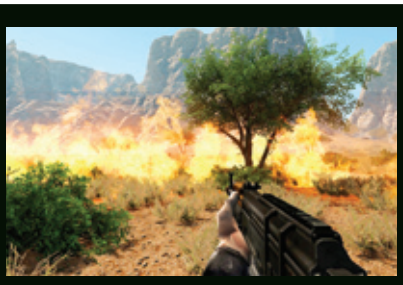
The lone drawback to all of these great mods is that they can draw you into the past so often that you don't take the time to fully appreciate *Fallout 3*. Try not to miss the classic-in-waiting that modders will be also obsessing over in a decade—unless, of course, a nuclear holocaust drives us into our Vaults.

MOD OF THE MONTH

FARCRYSIS *(CRYSIS)*

URL: http://snipr.com/5c447

If you didn't get enough of hunting the Jackal in the real *Far Cry 2*, soon you'll be able to hunt the evil arms dealer again in the FarCrysis total conversion for *Crysis*. Creator Simon "Simrad" Radivoev is keeping the rough outline of the plot while crafting all-new missions to mix everything up. No word yet on a release date, although the mod has been in production since early 2008, so we just might see something playable soon.



/// FarCrysis is exactly what it sounds like: the incestuous union of two great games. ///

VITALS
EMAIL: HOMEBREW@PCGAMER.COM
FIVE GAMES I'M PLAYING: WORLD OF GOO; FALLOUT 3; STAR TREK: JUDGEMENT RITES (YES, SERIOUSLY); RHIANNON: CURSE OF THE FOUR BRANCHES; NIKOPOL

STRATEGIC COMMAND

BY DAN STAPLETON

THE HARD WAY AND THE EASY WAY

THE BEST WAY TO LEARN TO PLAY AN RTS ONLINE IS BY WATCHING, THEN DOING

/// Watching this replay taught me a thing or two I didn't know about *RA3*'s Allied air power. ///

For players just getting into real-time strategy games, or even long-time players trying out a new one, venturing into online play can be like sticking a toe into piranha-infested hydrochloric acid. The traumatic, merciless, and repeated thumpings you will almost certainly endure at the hands of faceless foes for at least the first few games is enough to make you want to cut your losses and bail while you still have a few tattered shreds of pride.

SO, HOW CAN YOU become a competent player without suffering the beating of your life? Many people will tell you that you can learn all you need to know about a game from completing the single-player campaign. These people are not your friends. They're probably the same ones waiting for you on the multiplayer servers, rubbing their hands together in anticipation of fresh meat. A campaign may teach you the basic functions of each unit at your disposal and how to use the interface, but it probably won't teach you the most important parts of multiplayer gaming: how crucial the first three to five minutes of a multiplayer match are, how to use complementary units together, and how to out-think an opponent smarter and more adaptable than an AI opponent. Telling someone to simply play through the single-player campaign and then go online is roughly equivalent to potty-training a child shortly before enlisting him in the Marines.

IDEALLY, THE MOST natural and entertaining way to learn to play an RTS is for you and a few buddies to all get the game at the same time and play against each other. This lets you all advance in skill at the same gradual pace, and everybody's having a blast the whole time. If one person starts to get too good and unbalances the game, the solution is simple: the other three guys gang up and break his fingers. (And thus the term "playing with a handicap" was born.)

But let's face it: busy schedules and the evil temptation of real-world socializing make regular micro-LAN gaming impractical for a lot of us, leaving anonymous, no-strings-attached online play the only option. So, if you must, heed this advice: the best way to learn quickly is to study at the feet of a master. But, since you can't afford my rates,* I suggest you *download* a master. Most RTS games since *StarCraft* can record matches for playback, and there are a ton of sites out there that host archives of matches between phenomenally talented players. (Gamereplays.org is an excellent one-stop resource for most games. Also check out commandandconquer.com's battlecasts.) Yes, watching is generally less fun than playing, but you'll learn efficient build orders and nasty tricks that would have taken months for you to discover on your own.

WATCH A FEW OF the top-level players, but also watch some mid-level action to get a sense of what to expect from the guys you'll actually be going up against (the hotshots mostly play ranked and arranged games against people they know can give them a half-decent fight). After that, you're on your own. At the very least, try to take a few of them down with you.

*plus, I'm nowhere near as good as the top guys online

NO INSTANT-REPLAYS

The really inconvenient thing about watching replays is that there's no rewind function, so if you missed exactly how a player pulled off a devastating attack, you've got to start the replay again from the beginning. With so much going on at once, you'll probably have to watch a single replay multiple times to take it all in. EALA tells me that they'd love to add a rewind feature to the *C&C* games, but for technical reasons, doing so would make the replay files balloon from less than 1MB to more than 100MB.

VITALS
EMAIL: STRATEGICCOMMAND@PCGAMER.COM
FIVE GAMES I'M PLAYING: LEFT 4 DEAD; FALLOUT 3; COMMAND & CONQUER: RED ALERT 3; SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE; GRAND THEFT AUTO 4

SIM COLUMN

BY ANDY MAHOOD

LIME ROCK TIMES THREE

BUILDING THE PERFECT RACE TRACK

If you're a PC sim racer, you already know the platform completely blows its console competition off the track for adaptability and personalization. Car and track mods abound for most high-end sims, and if real-world authenticity is important to you, individual circuit renderings (from third-party modders or professional developers) have never been better.

For this month's column, I've arbitrarily selected a popular road racing venue (Connecticut's Lime Rock Park) to see which game has best replicated this 1.53-mile Northeast roller-coaster ride. Our first two tours are courtesy of motivated community modders, while the third is the product of some top-rated developers.

Cinch up those belts. There'll likely be some G-forces.

LIME ROCK PARK

(GRAND PRIX LEGENDS)

http://gplmz.bcsims.com/tracks/lime_gpl.zip

More than a decade old, *Grand Prix Legends* still commands the respect of all who drive it, and this indentured simulation has also spawned almost 600 add-on tracks from the modding community since 1998. I've only downloaded a fraction—40 at last count—but one of my favorites has always been Lime Rock Park.

Two versions exist—one with and one without the speed-arresting chicane at the top of turn five—but the chicane-less model (originally released in 2002) is the hands-down winner here. Developed by modders Brent Adams, Jim Barnes, and Eric Bourgouin, this *GPL* track mod is a tidy piece of work that handily showcases much of Lime Rock's unique topography. *GPL's* aging graphics engine may not fare that well in our modern high-res DX10 gaming landscape, but once you've carved out a lap or two on this surprisingly faithful mile-and-a-half ribbon of asphalt and concrete, you'll probably forget all about that coarse-looking 2D scenery. Rating: 6.5 out of 10.

/// The graphics may be dated but *Grand Prix Legends* cars fit the Lime Rock track like a well-worn glove. ///

LIME ROCK PARK 1.0

(rFACTOR)

www.rfactorcentral.com

rFactor is the undisputed champion of mod-friendly PC racing sims, and this multi-faceted 2005 indie racer features almost as many third-party add-on tracks as the more pedigreed *Grand Prix Legends*. The beefier graphics engine delivers vastly superior visual punch, however, and Ewan (Uzzi) Chalker's intricately detailed Lime Rock Park 1.10 entry (available in chicane and non-chicane flavors) took full advantage of this to earn a high-ranking spot in rFactorCentral.com's Hall of Fame.

The add-on's lush Connecticut scenery blends seamlessly with the serpentine twists and turns of the Skip Barber–operated race track, and its strategically placed concrete patches will give your force-feedback controller a steady workout. There are some minor layout discrepancies, but for a scratch-built community contribution, Lime Rock Park 1.10 delivers impressive real-world authenticity. Rating: 7.5 out of 10.

/// The popular *rFactor* Lime Rock entry follows the Connecticut circuit's every rise and fall. ///

LIME ROCK PARK

(iRACING.COM)

www.iracing.com

It may not seem sporting to compare freeware track mods with a professionally packaged sim racer (built by some of the finest gaming developers in the business), but after turning a few hundred laps on iRacing.com's Lime Rock circuit, I'd be remiss to exclude it. When it comes to corner-by-corner accuracy and precision, nothing can touch this puppy.

That's because iRacing.com serves double duty as a hobbyist racing sim and a real-world trainer for aspiring and established race drivers. The iRacing crew employed state-of-the-art laser scanning equipment to replicate every bump, dip, and compression in the 1.53-mile Lime Rock circuit, and the resultant ride is about as faithful as current computing technology permits. If there's even a minor surface anomaly on the real track that could upset your car in any way, you can bet dollars to doughnuts it found its way into the virtual track.

For better or worse, the iRacing folks have set an impossibly high new benchmark for all track modders to aim for. Rating: 9.5 out of 10.

VITALS
EMAIL: SIMCOLUMN@PCGAMER.COM
FIVE GAMES I'M PLAYING: IRACING.COM; RFACTOR; GRAND PRIX LEGENDS; GTR EVOLUTION; FAR CRY 2

BACKSPACE
BY EVAN LAHTI

GRIEFING 101

THE ZOMBIE UNSURVIVAL GUIDE

Agitators assemble! *Left 4 Dead*'s versus mode has ushered in a golden age of annoyance—an era where biting your friends' skulls is encouraged, and tactical use of vomit is a key to victory. Playing as the boss infected in *L4D* could be the most satisfying asymmetrical mode I've ever played, and after many scream-filled playthroughs, I've compiled some techniques guaranteed to produce the most aggravation in your adversaries. For bonus harassment, consult the "suggested mockery"—pre-generated trash-talk, so you can focus on doing what you do best: beating the health out of Louis, Zoey, Francis, and Bill.

GONE FISHIN'

Suggested mockery: "I dun' caught me a big one!"

If the survivors are the tender trout floating in the apocalypse's urban sea, Smokers are its undead fishermen, snaring the uninfected with ropy tongues. Valve used a baiting tactic when we played against them: having a Smoker pluck the player that's lagging behind, and calling in a Hunter to pounce the ally that attempts a rescue. Buy one, get one free.

SPIDER-HUNTER

Suggested mockery: "Can he swing from a web? / No he can't, he's a zombie"

The Hunter's agility is its greatest asset, but in open areas, it can make a better distraction than direct attacker. Those silhouettes that dart across the screen in horror movies? That's you. Springing off surfaces and hopping over the heads of grouped survivors can force their gaze upward, letting your horde friends get a few gnaws in. More importantly, it amplifies the tension created by the game's dim lighting and creepy audio cues. Jumping around doesn't inflict damage, but don't underestimate the fraying effects it'll have over your enemies' collective psyche.

DAMNED-BULANCE

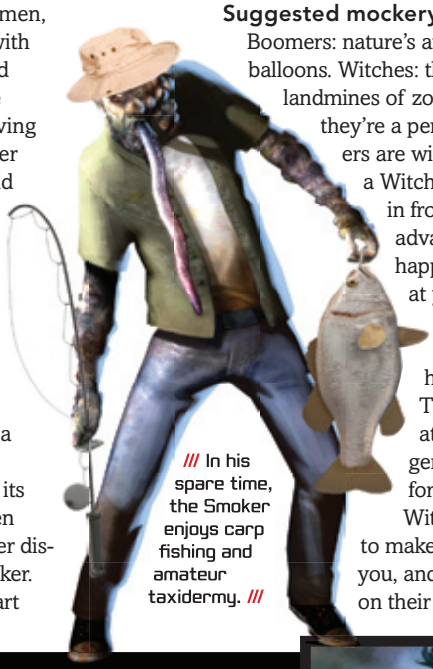
Suggested mockery: "I'm in ur safe room, eatin' ur survivors."

Survivors seek refuge where they expect to be safe, or where they'll find supplies. Ambush around ambulances and other areas that usually hold health kits–nine times out of 10, survivors will go out of their way to search them.

BOOMER ECLIPSE

Suggested mockery: "Boomshakalaka!"

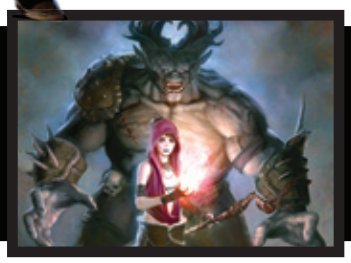
Boomers: nature's angriest undead water balloons. Witches: the anorexic, howling landmines of zombiekind. Paired, they're a perfect couple. Boomers are wide enough to hide a Witch if they're standing in front of them, so take advantage: any trigger-happy survivors aiming at you should shoot through, startling your pale, claw-handed girlfriend. This is best-executed at close range, but the general strategy remains: force survivors toward a Witch whenever possible to make the NPC work for you, and never let 'em engage on their own terms.



/// In his spare time, the Smoker enjoys carp fishing and amateur taxidermy. ///

NEXT MONTH

Save those skill points—we get our +2 Magazine Gauntlets of Hands-On all over the long-awaited spiritual successor to *Baldur's Gate*, *Dragon Age: Origins*, and break down the modern storytelling and gameplay mechanics BioWare's bringing to its medieval RPG.



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Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

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